

The Limits of the Possible

i

"He's not coming back out, I tell you!" stated a pimply-faced man, shaking his head with finality. "It's been an hour and a quarter since he went in. He's done for."

The townsfolk, huddled together in the midst of the ruins and rubble, watched the gaping black hole of the entrance to the tunnel in silence. A fat man dressed in a yellow smock shifted slightly from one foot to the other, cleared his throat and pulled his wrinkled cap from his head.

"We have to wait a bit longer," he said as he wiped the sweat from his sparse eyebrows.

"Why wait?" snorted pimply, "There in the caves lurks a basilisk, or have you forgotten, burgrave? Anyone goes down there, that's the end of them. Have you forgotten how many have died down there already? What are we waiting for?"

"This was the agreement, wasn't it?" murmured the fat man uncertainly.

"An agreement you made with a living man, burgrave" said the pimply-faced man's companion, a giant of a man in a leather butcher's apron. "He is now dead, as surely as the sun shines in the sky. It was plain from the beginning that he was headed towards death, like all the others before him. He didn't even take a mirror with him, only a sword - and everybody knows you need a mirror in order to kill a basilisk."

"At least we've saved some coin," added pimples "there's no one to pay for taking care of the basilisk. You might as well go home. As far as the sorcerer's horse and baggage... well it would be a shame if they went to waste."

"Yes," said the butcher, "It's a fine old mare and the saddlebags are full. Let's take a look."

"What are you doing?"

"Shut up, burgrave. Don't get in the way unless you want a punch in the face," threatened the pimpled man.

"A fine old mare," repeated the butcher.

"Leave the horse alone, my darling."

The butcher slowly turned around towards the stranger who had suddenly appeared from behind a collapsed wall, just at the back of the audience gathered around the tunnel entrance. The stranger had thick curly brown hair and wore a dark brown tunic under a puffy cotton coat and tall riding boots. He had no weapons.

"Step away from the horse," he repeated with a menacing smile. "What have we here? A horse and saddlebags belonging to another and yet you eye them greedily and paw through them. Is that honourable?"

Pimple slowly slipped a hand inside his overcoat and glanced at the butcher. The butcher gave a nod and signalled toward the crowd, out of which stepped two strong, close cropped, youths. Both carried heavy clubs, like those used to stun animals in the slaughterhouse.

"Who are you?" demanded the pimple-faced man, whose hand remained hidden inside his overcoat, "to tell us what is and isn't honourable?"

"That's none of your business, my dear."

"You carry no weapons."

"That's true," the stranger's smile grew even more poisonous, "I don't carry weapons."

"That's no good," pimple drew a long knife out from inside his coat, "Too bad for you you're not armed."

The butcher also drew a blade; a long hunting knife. The other two men approached, brandishing their clubs.

"I don't carry weapons," responded the stranger, not budging, "but I'm always armed."

From behind the ruins, two young women stepped out lightly and confidently. The crowd quickly parted, retreated then thinned out.

The girls smiled, flashing their teeth, and blinked. They had blue stripes tattooed from the corners of their eyes to the tips of their ears. Lynx pelt clad their strong muscles from thigh to hip and their bare arms curved above their mail gauntlets. From behind the mail-clad shoulder of each rose the hilt of a sabre.

Pimply got down on one knee and slowly, very slowly, placed his knife on the ground.

From the hole in ruins came a rumble of stones, grinding, and then from the darkness there emerged two hands clutching the jagged edge of the wall. Following the hands, a white head appeared, the hair powdered with brick dust, a pale face and then, finally, shoulders, above which stood the hilt of a sword. A murmur escaped the crowd.

The alabaster-haired man straightened and pulled a strange shape from the hole; a small, odd looking body covered in dust and blood. Holding the beast by its long lizard-like tail, the man tossed it to the feet of the burgrave without a word. The burgrave jumped backwards and tripped on a fragment of wall, his eyes glued to a curved bird-like beak, webbed crescent-shaped wings and claws like sickles on its scaly feet. Its slashed throat, once carmine, was now a dirty red-brown. Its sunken eyes were glassy.

"Here's the basilisk," said the white-haired man as he brushed the dust from his trousers, "As agreed, that'll be 200 lintars, good ones, not too worn. I will check them, I'm warning you."

With shaking hands, the burgrave produced a large purse. The white-haired man looked around at the townsfolk, his gaze resting on the pimply-faced man, his discarded knife at his feet. He also noticed the man in the brown tunic and the young women in the lynx pelts.

"It's always the same," he said as he took the purse from the burgrave's nervous hands, "I risk my neck for a few measly coins and you, meanwhile, try to rob me. You people never change, damn you to hell!"

"We haven't touched your bags," the butcher muttered, backing away. The men armed with the clubs had long since hidden themselves in the crowd. "Your things have not been disturbed, sir"

"I'm glad to hear it," the white-haired man smiled. At the sight of his smile, which bloomed on his pale face like an open wound, the crowd began to disperse. "And that is why, brother, you have nothing to worry about. Go in peace. But go quickly."

Pimpily, backing away, was about to run. The spots stood out on his pallid face making him look even more hideous.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" called the man in the brown tunic, "You've forgotten about something."

"What's that... sir?"

"You pulled a knife on me."

The tallest of the young women, who stood waiting with her long legs apart, turned on her hip. Her sabre, drawn faster than the eye could see, cut through the air. The head of the pimply-faced man flew upwards, tracing an arc before disappearing into the gaping hole. His body rolled stiff and heavy, like a freshly felled tree, amongst the broken rubble. The crowd cried out in unison. The second girl, her hand on the hilt of her sabre, turned agilely, covering her back. It was unnecessary - the crowd rushed and stumbled through the ruins towards the town as fast as their legs could carry them. At the head of the crowd, leaping impressively, was the burgrave - slightly ahead of the butcher.

"A beautiful strike," commented the white-haired man coldly as he shielded his eyes from the sun with a black-gloved hand. "A beautiful strike from a Zerricanian sabre. I humbly bow before the skill and beauty of free warrior women. I am Geralt of Rivia."

"And I..." the unknown man indicated to a faded coat of arms emblazoned on his brown tunic representing three black birds aligned on a field of gold, "I am Borch, also called Three Jackdaws. And these are my bodyguards Tea and Vea. At least that's what I call them because their true names are a tongue twister. They are both, as you so finely guessed, Zerricanian."

"Thanks to them, or so it would seem, I still have my horse and belongings. My thanks to you, warriors, and also to you, noble lord."

"Three Jackdaws. And I'm no gentleman. Is there anything keeping you in this region, Geralt of Rivia?"

"Nothing at all."

"Perfect. In that case, I have a proposition. Not far from here, at the crossroads on the road to the river-port, is an inn called The Pensive Dragon. The food is unequalled throughout this whole region. I'm on my way there now with the intention of dining and spending the night. It would be an honour if you would accompany me."

"Borch," replied Geralt, white head turning away from his horse, looking into the bright eyes of the stranger, "I'd like you to know so that there be no misunderstanding between us. I'm a witcher."

"I thought as much. And you said that as if you were saying, 'I'm a leper.'"

"There are some," Geralt replied calmly, "that would prefer the company of a leper to that of a witcher."

"And there are others," replied Three Jackdaws with a smile, "who would prefer the company of sheep to that of young ladies. In the end, all I can do is pity them. I stand by my proposal."

Geralt took off a glove and shook the stranger's outstretched hand.

"I accept. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Let's be off then, I'm starving."

II

The landlord wiped the uneven surface of the table with a cloth, bowed and smiled. He was missing two front teeth.

"Yes..." Three Jackdaws stared for a moment at the blackened ceiling and watched the spiders walking playfully across it. "First... some beer. On second thoughts, a keg of beer. And with the beer... what do you recommend, my dear?"

"Cheese?" the landlord suggested uncertainly.

"No," frowned Borch, "Cheese should be for afters. With the beer we'd like something sour and spicy."

"At your service," the landlord smiled even wider. His two front teeth were not the only ones that he lacked. "How about eels marinated in garlic and vinegar, or green pickles..."

"Perfect. For two please. And after that, some soup. Like the one I ate last time with the mussels, small fish and other crap floating in it."

"Seafood soup?"

"Yes. Next, roast lamb with eggs and onions. Then about sixty crayfish. Throw some fennel into the pan, as much as you can muster. Then ewe's cheese and a salad. After that... we'll

see."

"At your service. Is that for everyone? All four of you?"

The tallest of the Zerricanians shook her head and patted her belly significantly, accentuating the way her linen shirt clung to her body.

"I forgot," Three Jackdaws winked at Geralt, "The girls are watching their figures. Landlord! Lamb only for us two. Bring the beer and eels immediately, leave the rest for a while so that the other dishes don't get

cold. We didn't come here to stuff our faces, just to spend time in pleasant conversation."

"I understand completely, sir," replied the landlord, bowing once more.

"Understanding - this is an important quality in your line of work. Give me your hand, my beauty," gold coin jingled and the landlord smiled as widely as possible.

"This is not an advance," specified Three Jackdaws, "it's a little extra. Now get back to your kitchen, my good fellow."

It was hot in the alcove. Geralt loosened his belt, removed his doublet then rolled up the sleeves of his shirt.

"I see you're not troubled by lack of silver," he said, "Do you live by the privileges of knighthood?"

"Partly," Three Jackdaws smiled in answer and didn't elaborate.

They made short work of the eels and quarter of the beer barrel. Although the Zerricanians were obviously enjoying the evening, they did not drink much of the beer. They spoke together quietly until Vea suddenly burst into throaty laughter.

"Do the girls speak the common language?" asked Geralt as he watched them out of the corner of his eye.

"Badly. And they're not exactly chatterboxes, which is nice. How's your soup, Geralt?"

"Hmm."

"Drink up."

"Hmm."

"Geralt..." Three Jackdaws gestured with his spoon and belched discretely, "Returning for one moment to the conversation we had whilst on the road:

it's my understanding, witcher,

that you wander from one end of the world to the other, killing any monsters you meet along the way - for pay. That is your job, isn't it?"

"More or less."

"What if somebody personally appeals to you to go somewhere specific? Say to carry out a special order. What do you do then?"

"That depends on who's asking me and what they have in mind."

"And the wages?"

"That too," the witcher shrugged, "'Everything becomes more expensive if you want to live well' as one of my magician friends likes to say."

"Quite a selective approach, and I would say very practical. Yet there is a certain principal underlying it, Geralt. The conflict between the forces of Order and those of Chaos, as one of my wizard friends likes to say. I imagine that you always take missions that involve protecting humans from the Evil that is all around us. Undoubtedly this places you on the good side of the fence."

"The forces of Order, the forces of Chaos... what grand words, Borch. You want at all costs for me to place myself on one side of the fence in a conflict that all regard as eternal, a conflict that's been going on since before we were born and will continue long after we're gone. On which side should the blacksmith place himself in this business? Or the landlord who hurries to bring us roast lamb? What, according to you, defines the boundary between Chaos and Order?"

"It's very simple," Three Jackdaws looked the witcher right in the eye, "Chaos represents a threat. It is on the side of violence and aggression. Order, on the other hand, opposes it. That is why it must be protected and needs someone to defend it. But let us drink and make a start on this lamb."

"Good idea."

Still concerned for their figures, the Zerricanians had taken a break from eating to devote themselves to drinking at an accelerated pace. Veia leaned on the shoulder of her companion, and murmured something in her ear, her braids brushing the tabletop. Tea, the shorter of the two, burst into laughter, her tattooed eyelids blinking merrily.

"Well," continued Borch, gnawing on a bone. "Let us continue our conversation, if you'll permit. I see that prefer not to take sides in the conflict between the forces. You just want to do your job."

"Yes."

"But you cannot escape the conflict between Order and Chaos. In spite of your comparison, you're not a blacksmith. I saw how you work; you enter an underground tunnel and come out of it with a small, mangled basilisk. There is a difference, my pretty, between shoeing horses

and killing basilisks. You've already indicated that you'll journey to the other side of the world to slay a certain monster if the pay is worth it. Let's say a fierce dragon destroys..."

"Bad example," interrupted Geralt. "You see, the boundary becomes blurred already. I don't kill dragons, in spite of the fact they no doubt represent Chaos."

"Why is that?" Three Jackdaws licked his fingers, "But that's outrageous! Surely of all the monsters, the dragon is the most dangerous, vicious and cruel. Most terrible of all the reptiles. It attacks humans, spits fire and it even steals virgins! Haven't you heard enough stories about that? Is it possible that you, witcher, do not have a few dragon slayings in your list of accomplishments?"

"I do not hunt dragons," Geralt replied dryly, "Giant centipedes, yes. Dracolizards, dermopterans but not real dragons, greens, blacks or reds. Make no mistake about it."

"You astonish me," replied Three Jackdaws, "But nevertheless, I get the message. Enough talking about dragons for now. I see something red on the

horizon; undoubtedly our crayfish. Drink up!"

They noisily broke the shells with their teeth and sucked out the white flesh. Salty water, stinging painfully, ran down to their wrists. Borch served up some more beer, scraping the bottom of the small cask with the ladle, while the Zerricanians amused themselves by watching the goings on around them. They laughed unpleasantly at a soothsayer on the next table over and the witcher was convinced that they were looking for a fight. Three Jackdaws also noticed it and waved a crayfish at them threateningly. The girls giggled, Tea blowing him a kiss and giving him an ostentatious wink. Her tattoos made the gesture slightly macabre.

"They truly are wildcats," murmured Three Jackdaws to Geralt. "They must be watched all the time otherwise, in less than two seconds flat and without warning, the ground is likely to be strewn with entrails. However, they are worth all the money in the world. Did you know that they can..?"

"I know," replied Geralt, nodding. "It is difficult to find a better escort. Zerricanians are born warriors, trained in combat from a very early age."

"I wasn't talking about that." Borch spat a crayfish pincer onto the table. "I was thinking about their performance in bed."

Geralt watched the young girls out of the corner of his eye. Both smiled and Vea seized a shellfish, as quick as a flash. She cracked the carapace with her teeth and blinked as she regarded the witcher. Her lips glistened with the salty water. Three Jackdaws belched loudly.

"So, Geralt," he continued, "you don't hunt dragons, green or otherwise. I'll bear it in mind. Why categorise them by these three colours, may I ask?"

"Four colours, to be precise."

"You only mentioned three."

"You seem to have a great interest in dragons, Borch. Is there a particular reason?"

"I'm just curious."

"These colours are the customary categorisation, although not a precise one. Green dragons are most widespread though in fact they are rather gray, like dracolizards. To tell you the truth the reds are more red brown, the colour of brick. The large dark brown dragons are usually called black dragons. Rarest of all are the white dragons. I've never seen one. They live in the far North, apparently."

"Interesting. Do you know what other types of dragons I've heard of?"

"I know," replied Geralt, swallowing a mouthful of beer. "I've also heard of them: the gold. But they don't exist."

"But how can you be sure? Just because you've never seen one? You've never seen a white one either."

"That's not the point. Across the seas, in Ofir and Zangwebar, there are white horses with black stripes. I've never seen those either, but I know that they exist. The golden dragon is a myth, a legend, like the phoenix. Phoenixes and golden dragons do not exist."

Vea, leaning on her elbows, looked at him curiously.

"You certainly know what you're talking about - you're a witcher," said Borch drawing some more beer from the small keg. "However, I think any myth, any legend, can contain a grain of truth that sometimes can't be ignored."

"That is so," confirmed Geralt, "but that is the territory of dreams, hopes and desires: it's about the belief that there is no limit to what is possible, just because there is sometimes a wild chance that it might be true."

"Chance, exactly. It may be there once was a golden dragon; the product of a single, unique mutation."

"If that's the case, that dragon would've suffered the fate of all mutants," the witcher bowed his head. "It couldn't survive, because it's too different."

"Now you oppose natural law, Geralt. My wizard friend was in the habit of saying that each and every being can prevail in nature in one manner or another. The end of one existence always announces the beginning of another. There is no limit, at least when it comes to nature."

"Your wizard friend was a huge optimist. There is one element he didn't take into consideration; errors made by nature or those that play with it. The golden dragon and all the other mutants of its species, even if they have existed, could not survive. A natural limit inherent in them has prevented it."

"What's that?"

"Mutants..." the muscles in Geralt's jaw tensed, "Mutants are sterile, Borch. Only legends permit what nature condemns. Only myths can ignore the limits of what's possible."

Three Jackdaws remained silent. Geralt saw that the girls' faces had suddenly become serious. Vea quickly leaned towards him, embracing him with her hard, muscular arms. He felt her lips on his cheek, wet with beer.

"They like you," said Three Jackdaws slowly, "The devil take it, they like you!"

"What's so strange about that?" replied the witcher, smiling sadly.

"Nothing. But a toast is necessary. Landlord! Another keg!"

"Not that much. A tankard at most."

"Make that two tankards!" shouted Three Jackdaws. "Tea, I must leave for a moment."

The Zerricanian picked up her sabre from the bench as she rose before inspecting the room with a tired glance. The witcher noticed several pairs of eyes sparkle with greed at the sight of Borch's overstuffed coin-purse, but nobody dared to follow him as he staggered in the direction of the courtyard. Tea shrugged before following her employer.

"What's your real name?" asked Geralt of the girl who remained sitting at the table.

Vea smiled revealing a line of white teeth, much of her shirt was unbuttoned as far as the last possible limit of decency allowed. Geralt did not doubt for an instant that her demeanour was designed to test the resistance of the other patrons in the room.

"Alveaenerle."

"That's beautiful." The witcher was sure that the Zerricanian now gazed at him doe-eyed, seductively. He was not mistaken.

"Vea?"

"Hmm..."

"Why do you ride with Borch? Warriors love of freedom. Can you tell me?"

"Hmm..."

"Hmm, what?"

"He is..." the Zerricanian wrinkled her brow while she tried to find the right words, "He is the most... the most beautiful."

The witcher shook his head. The criteria used by women to assess the desirability of men had always been an enigma to him.

Three Jackdaws burst into the alcove re-buttoning his trousers and gave a loud command to the landlord. Tea, two steps behind him, feigned boredom as she looked around the tavern, the merchants and the mariners present avoiding her eyes. Vea sucked at a crayfish while casting the witcher knowing glances.

"I'll have another order of eel for everyone, braised this time," Three Jackdaws sat down heavily, his still open belt jangled. "I'm tired of crayfish and I'm still hungry. I have reserved

you a room, Geralt. You have no reason to be wandering this night. Let's have some more fun. To your health, girls!"

"Vessekheal," Veia replied, holding up her glass. Tea blinked and stretched. Her lovely breasts, contrary to Geralt's expectations, did not burst out of her shirt.

"Let's have some fun!" Three Jackdaws leaned across the table, and slapped Tea on the behind, "Let's party, witcher, Hey! Landlord! Over here!" The landlord quickly approached them, wiping his hands on his apron. "Do you have a large tub? Like one for washing linen in: solid and roomy."

"How big, sir?"

"For four people."

"For... four," repeated the landlord smiling widely.

"Four," confirmed Three Jackdaws, pulling his full coin-purse out of his pocket.

"We'll find one for you," promised the landlord as he moistened his lips.

"Perfect," replied Borch, all smiles. "Order one and bring it up into my room and see that it's filled with hot water. Get to it, my dear chap, and don't forget beer and at least three tankards." The Zerricanians laughed and winked at the witcher.

"Which do you prefer?" asked Three Jackdaws. "Huh, Geralt?"

The witcher scratched his head.

"I know it's a difficult choice," continued Three Jackdaws with a knowing air. "I also have trouble sometimes. Well, we will decide when we're in the tub. Hey, girls! Help me up the stairs."

III

There was a barricade on the bridge. A long and solid beam positioned on trestles barred access to the other bank of the river. Halberdiers in buttoned leather jackets and mail were gathered there, standing guard on both sides. Aloft, a crimson pennant bearing a silver griffin flapped in the wind.

"What the devil?" exclaimed Three Jackdaws as they approached the barricade. "We can't pass?"

"Do you have a pass?" asked the nearest halberdier, without removing from his mouth the straw he was chewing to stave off hunger or quite simply to kill time.

"What pass? What's going on? An epidemic of cattle plague? War? In whose name do you block the road?"

"On the order of King Niedamir, Lord of Caingorn." the guard moved the straw to the other corner of his mouth and indicated to the pennant.

"Without safe conduct, you cannot pass."

"How stupid," interrupted Geralt in a tired voice. "We are not, however, in Caingorn but in the county of Holopole. It's just as well that Holopole and not Caingorn collects the toll on the bridges of the Braa. What's it got to do with Niedamir?"

"Don't ask me," replied the guard, spitting out his straw. "I'm only here to check the passes, if you want, you can ask our commanding officer."

"Where is he?"

"Over there, making the most of the sun behind the toll collector's booth," replied the guard, looking not at Geralt but at the naked thighs of the Zerricanians which lay nonchalantly across their saddles.

A guard was sitting on a pile of dry straw behind the hut of the toll collector. He was drawing in the sand, with the end of his halberd, a picture of a woman; a rather detailed view from an unusual perspective. Next to him there was a thin man, half dozing, delicately strumming chords on a lute. An eccentric plum coloured hat decorated with a silver buckle and a

long egret feather drooped over his eyes. Geralt recognized the hat and the feather so famous in Buina and Iaruga and known in all the manors, castles, guesthouses, inns and brothels. Especially in the brothels.

"Jaskier!"

"Witcher Geralt!" merry blue eyes appeared from under the hat. "What a surprise! Is it really you? You wouldn't happen to have a pass, by chance?"

"What's all this business about passes? What's going on here, Jaskier? I'm travelling with the knight Borch of the Three Jackdaws and his escort and we want to cross the river."

"I'm also stuck here." Jaskier rose and lifted his hat before bowing to the Zerricanians with a courtly flourish. "They won't let me pass either, me, Jaskier, the most celebrated of minstrels and poets for a thousand miles around. It was the lieutenant who refused; and he's also an artist, as you can see."

"I can't let anyone cross without a pass," stated the lieutenant with a disconsolate air before adding the finishing touches to his sand picture with the tip of his weapon.

"We'll take a detour along the bank. It will take longer to get to Hengfors, but we don't have much choice," said the witcher.

"To Hengfors?" the bard looked surprised, "You mean you're not here to see Niedamir? You're not hunting the dragon?"

"What dragon?" asked Three Jackdaws, looking intrigued.

"You don't know? You really don't know? In that case, I shall tell you all about it, my lords. As I am obliged to wait here in the hope that somebody with a pass accepts my company, we have lots of time. Sit down."

"Wait," interrupted Three Jackdaws, "It's nearly midday and I'm thirsty, plague on it! We can't discuss such matters with dry throats. Tea and Veal, hurry back to town and buy a keg."

"I like the way you think, lord..."

"Borch, also called Three Jackdaws."

"Jaskier, nicknamed The Unrivalled... by certain young ladies."

"Get on with it, Jaskier," interrupted the witcher, impatient. "We haven't got all day."

The bard seized the neck of his lute and violently strummed some chords.

"What would you prefer? In verse or in prose?"

"Normally."

"As you like." Jaskier did not lay down his lute. "Listen well, noble sirs, the events took place one week ago, not far from a free city named Holopole. Ah yes, in the small hours of the morning, dawn tinting red the veil of mist in the meadows..."

"It was supposed to be normally," the witcher pointed out.

"That is normally, isn't it? Okay, okay, I understand. Briefly, without metaphors. Near the town of Holopole, a dragon alit."

"Oh really?" exclaimed the witcher, "That seems incredible - nobody has seen a dragon in these parts for years. Isn't it just a dracolizard? Some of them can be quite big..."

"Don't insult me, witcher, I know what it is. I've seen it. By chance I just came to Holopole for the market and I saw it with my own eyes. My ballad was already prepared, but you didn't want..."

"Carry on. Is it big?"

"It's as long as three horses, to the withers no bigger than a horse, but much fatter. Gray as sand."

"Green, then."

"Yes. It swooped down without warning on a herd of sheep. The shepherds ran away and it killed a dozen animals and ate four of them before taking flight."

"It flew away..." Geralt nodded his head. "That's it?"

"No, it returned the next morning, nearer to the city this time. It dived down onto a group of women who were washing their linen at the edge of the Braa. And did they run, my friend! I have never laughed so much in my life. Then the dragon executed two turns above Holopole before attacking some ewes in a nearby pasture. What a lot of panic and confusion it started! The day before, well, nobody had believed the shepherds... the burgrave then started to mobilise a militia and the guilds, but before he had time to organize them, the people had taken matters into their own hands and sorted it out themselves."

"How?"

"With a very popular method. The master shoe-maker, a certain Kozojed, conceived of a means to finish off the reptile. They killed a sheep then stuffed it full of hellebore, belladonna, hemlock, sulphur and shoemaker's pitch. To be on the safe side, the local

pharmacist added two quarts of boil remedy and had the priest of the Temple of Kreve bless the offering. Then they staked the stuffed sheep in the middle of the herd. To tell you the truth, nobody believed that the dragon would be attracted by one stinking piece of shit surrounded by a thousand others. But reality exceeded our expectations. Forsaking the sheep that were alive and bleating, the reptile swallowed the bait along with the stake."

"What then? Tell me more, Jaskier."

"What else can I do? I'm not going to stop now. Listen to the rest: barely enough time had passed for a skilful man to untie the corset of a lady when the dragon started roaring and emitting smoke from both front and behind. Next it did a somersault, tried to fly away and then fell down motionless. Two volunteers approached it to check if it still breathed. They were the

local grave-digger and the village idiot, conceived by the lumberjack's daughter, a deranged girl who had been knocked up by a company of pikemen passing through Holopole during the rebellion of the Voivod Tracasse."

"What lies you speak, Jaskier."

"I do not lie; I do nothing but colour gray reality. There's a difference."

"Not really. Carry on, we're wasting time."

"As I was saying, a grave-digger and a courageous simpleton went as scouts. We then raised for them a nice burial mound, small but pleasing to the eye."

"Ah, good," said Borch. "That means that the dragon still lived."

"And how," replied Jaskier merrily. "It lived, but it was too weak to eat the gravedigger and the idiot; it only sucked their blood. It then flew off... to the great anxiety of all, even though it found it difficult to take off. The dragon crashed with a roar every cubit and a half then took off again. Sometimes it crawled, dragging its hind legs behind it. The more courageous followed it at a distance without losing sight of it. And you know what?"

"Speak, Jaskier."

"The dragon plunged into a ravine up in Big Kestrel Mountain, not far from the source of the Braa. It remains hidden in the caves."

"Now it all becomes clear," announced Geralt. "The dragon lived in these caves in state of lethargy for centuries; I've heard of similar cases. Its treasure must also be there. I know now why soldiers are blocking the bridge. Somebody wants to lay their hands on the treasure and that somebody is called Niedamir of Caingorn."

"Exactly," confirmed the troubadour. "The whole city of Holopole boils for this reason, because the people consider that the dragon's treasure belongs to them. But they fear to oppose to Niedamir. The king is a young

featherbrain who has not yet started to shave, but he knew how to show that it was dangerous to take him on. Niedamir wants this dragon more than anything. That's why his reaction was so prompt."

"He wants the treasure, you mean."

"I'm convinced that the dragon interests him more than the treasure. Because, you see, the principality of Malleore has aroused the appetite of Niedamir for a long time. After the strange death of the prince, there remained a princess of marriageable age. The powers of Malleore did not see Niedamir and the other suitors in a good light because they knew that any new power would want to keep a tight rein on them; a situation that a gullible, young princess would not know how to deal with. They therefore dug out a dusty old prophecy that assured that the crown and the hand of the girl would belong to the one who conquers a dragon. They believed that this would keep the peace, knowing that no one had seen dragons in the region in such a long time. Niedamir didn't care about the legend. He tried every possible means to take Malleore by force but when the news of the appearance of the dragon of Holopole reached his ears, he understood that he could consequently conquer the noblemen of Malleore with their own weapon. If he returns to Malleore triumphantly brandishing the head of the dragon, they will welcome him as a monarch sent by the Gods, and the powers that be will not dare say a word. Don't be surprised that he seeks this dragon like a cat stalks a mouse. All the more so as this dragon crawls along with difficulty. For Niedamir it's a pure godsend, a smile of destiny, damn it."

"And it cuts out the competition."

"Well, I guess so. It also cools the ardour of the inhabitants of Holopole. He must have given a pass to all of the horsemen in the vicinity who might be able to strike down the dragon, because Niedamir is not keen to enter the caves himself, sword in hand, to fight the dragon. In a flash he had the most celebrated dragon slayers gathered around him. You probably know most of them, Geralt."

"It's possible. Who? "

"Eyck of Denesle, for starters."

"Son of a..." The witcher whistled softly, "The god-fearing and virtuous Eyck: the dauntless knight, beyond reproach, himself."

"You know him then, Geralt?" Borch asked. "Is he really such a specialist in dragons?"

"Not just dragons; Eyck knows how to deal with all monsters. He's even struck down manticores and griffins. He's also defeated a few dragons, or so I've heard. He's good, but the lunatic ruins business by refusing to take payment. Who else, Jaskier?"

"The Crinfrid Reavers."

"The dragon doesn't stand a chance, even if it recovers its health. Those three are a famous band of experienced hunters. They don't fight within the rules, but their efficiency is without question. They exterminated all the dracolizards and giant centipedes of Redania, killing three red and one black dragon along the way, and that really is something. Is that everyone?"

"No. Six dwarfs also joined them: five bearded men commanded by Yarpen Zigrin."

"I don't know him."

"You've undoubtedly heard about the dragon Ocvista of Mount Quartz."

"I've heard of it. I've even seen stones that came from his treasure; sapphires in incredible shades and diamonds as big as cherries."

"Know that it was Yarpen Zigrin and his dwarfs that slew Ocvista. I also composed a ballad about this adventure but it was quite boring and you lost nothing by not hearing it."

"Is that everybody?"

"Yes. Not counting you. You insisted that you knew nothing about the dragon. Who knows, maybe it's true. Anyway, you now know. Now what?"

"Now nothing. I'm not interested in the dragon."

"Ah! Very sneaky, Geralt. In any case, you don't have a pass."

"I repeat: the dragon doesn't interest me. What about you, Jaskier? What brought you to these lands?"

"The usual." The troubadour shrugged. "I have to be near events and stimulating situations. People will talk about this battle with the dragon for a long time. I could, of course, compose a ballad from the tales they'll tell, but it will be better if it's sung by somebody who saw the battle with their own eyes."

"Battle?" asked Three Jackdaws. "It's more of an act reminiscent of an autopsy or the butchery of a pig. The more I listen to you, the more you astound me. A bunch of warriors stumbling over each other to finish off a half-dead dragon that's been poisoned by some yokel, I don't know whether to laugh or puke."

"You're mistaken about the half-dead part," replied Geralt, "If the dragon didn't die straight after it swallowed the poison, it means that it will have recovered. It's of no great importance; the Crinfrid Reavers will kill it all the same, but the battle, if you must know, will not be quick."

"Your money's on the Reavers then, Geralt?"

"Definitely."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," the artistic guard who had kept silent until then interrupted. "The dragon is a magical living being that can only be killed by spells. If somebody helps the sorceress who crossed the bridge yesterday..."

"Who?" Geralt's head tilted to look at him.

"A sorceress," repeated the guard. "As I said."

"What was her name?"

"She gave it, but I've forgotten. She had a pass. Young, attractive in her own way, but those eyes... you know the type, lords... they send a shiver down your spine when they look at you.

tt

"Do you know who it might be, Jaskier?"

"No," replied the bard, grimacing. "Young, attractive and those eyes... it's not much to go on. They all answer this description. None of these girls who I know - and I know a lot - seem to look more than twenty-five, thirty years, but many of them remember the days when Novigrad was still a forest of conifers. But don't women make elixirs of mandrake? That can also make their eyes shine. It's definitely a woman, that's for sure."

"Was she a redhead?" the witcher asked.

"No, sir," answered the lieutenant. "She had black hair."

"What was the colour of her horse? Chestnut with a white star?"

"No, it was as dark as her hair. I'm telling you, lords, it is she who will exterminate the dragon. Dragons are magician's business. Human strength can do nothing against these monsters."

"I'm curious to know what the shoemaker Kozojed thinks about it," said Jaskier, laughing. "If he had had something stronger to hand than hellebore and belladonna, the dragon's skin would be drying on a fence, my ballad would already be finished and I would not be drying out in the sun today... "

"Why didn't Niedamir take you with him?" Geralt asked, giving the poet a dirty look. "You stayed in Holopole when he left. Doesn't the king like the company of artists? Why are you here drying out instead of playing for the king?"

"It's because of a young widow," answered Jaskier with a despondent air.

"Damn it! I romped about with her and when I awoke the following day Niedamir and the troops had already crossed the river. They even took this

Kozojed and the scouts of the militia of Holopole, but had forgotten about me. I tried unsuccessfully to explain it to the lieutenant, but he..."

"If you had a pass, there wouldn't have been a problem," explained the halberdier dispassionately, leaning against the wall of the toll collector's booth. "No pass, no debate. An order is an order..."

"Ah!" Three Jackdaws interrupted him. "The girls are back with the beer."

"And not alone," added Jaskier getting up. "Look at that horse. It looks like a dragon."

The Zerricanians emerged at a gallop from the birch wood flanked by a horseman riding a large nervous stallion, dressed for war.

The witcher also rose.

The rider wore a purple velvet tunic and a short jacket adorned with sable fur. He looked at them arrogantly from his saddle. Geralt knew this type of look and didn't much care for it.

"Hello, gentlemen. I am Dorregaray," the horseman introduced himself as he dismounted slowly and with dignity. "Master Dorregaray. Magician."

"Master Geralt. Witcher."

"Master Jaskier. Poet."

"Borch, otherwise Three Jackdaws. The girls opening the barrel are with me. I believe you already know them, Lord Dorregaray."

"Indeed," replied the magician without smiling. "The beautiful Zerricanian warriors and I have already exchanged greetings."

"Oh well! To your health!" Jaskier distributed the leather goblets brought by Vea. "Drink with us, sir magician. Lord Borch, can the lieutenant also join us?"

"Sure. Join us, good warrior."

"I think" said the magician having taken a small sip in a distinguished fashion, "that you're waiting at the bridge for the same reason that I do."

"If you're thinking of the dragon, Lord Dorregaray," replied Jaskier, "that is it exactly. I want to be present at the battle and to compose a ballad. Unfortunately, the lieutenant here, a man some might say is lacking in manners, refused me passage. He demands a pass."

"I beg your pardon." the halberdier clucked his tongue and drank his beer. "I can let nobody through without permission. I have no choice in the matter. It seems that all of Holopole prepared wagons to hunt the dragon in the mountain, but I must comply with orders... "

"Your orders, soldier," Dorregaray interrupted, frowning, "concern the unpleasant rabble, the prostitutes likely to spread immorality and riot, thieves, scoundrels and that type. But not me."

"I let nobody through without permission, " retorted the lieutenant pointedly. "I swear..."

"Don't swear," Three Jackdaws interrupted him, rather coldly. "Tea, pour another one for the valiant warrior! Let us sit down, my lords. To drink standing up, quickly and without appreciating the merchandise, is not fitting for the nobility."

They sat down on logs scattered around the keg. The halberdier, newly promoted to noble, became crimson with contentment.

"Drink, brave captain," pressed Three Jackdaws.

"I am only a lieutenant, not a captain," he answered, going red with renewed vigour.

"But you will become a captain, it's obvious." Borch grinned. "Boys as clever as you get promoted in a jiffy."

Dorregaray turned to Geralt having refused an additional glassful:

"In town they're still talking about your basilisk, noble witcher, and you are already taking an interest in the dragon," he said in a low voice. "I'm curious to know if you intend to slay this endangered species for pleasure or for pay."

"Such curiosity is unusual," replied Geralt, "when it comes from somebody who flocks double quick to the execution of a dragon to rip out his teeth. Aren't they precious for the making of your medicines and magical elixirs? Is it true, noble magician, that those ripped from still living dragons are the best?"

"Are you sure that's why I'm here?"

"Yes, I'm sure about that. But somebody has beaten you to it, Dorregaray. One of your female colleagues crossed the bridge armed with the pass that you lack. A sorceress with black hair, if it interests you."

"On a black horse?"

"Yes, apparently."

"Yennefer," said Dorregaray with a worried air.

The witcher shuddered, unnoticed by anyone.

A silence set in, that the future captain disrupted with a belch:

"Nobody... without a pass."

"Would 200 lintars be enough for you?" Geralt offered, retrieving the purse acquired from the fat burgrave from his pocket.

"Geralt," said Three Jackdaws, smiling in an enigmatic way. "Really..."

"Please accept my apologies, Borch. I'm sorry I can't accompany you to Hengfors. Another time perhaps, if we meet again."

"Nothing is compelling me to go to Hengfors," Three Jackdaws replied carefully. "Nothing at all, Geralt."

"Please put the purse away, sir," threatened the future captain. "It's corruption, pure and simple. Even for 300, I won't let you cross."

"And for 500?" Borch took out his purse. "Put away your silver, Geralt. I take responsibility for payment of the toll. It's starting to amuse me. 500, soldier. 100 per head, considering my girls as a single and beautiful unit. What do you say?"

"Goodness me," the future captain was anxious as he hid Borch's purse inside his tunic. "What shall I tell the king?"

"You should say to him," suggested Dorregaray as he stood up and withdrew an ivory wand from his belt, "that you were scared senseless you when you saw the show."

"What show, sir?"

The magician drew a form with his wand and shouted out a spell. A pine growing next to the river exploded; wild flames consumed it from base to top in an instant.

"To the horses!" Jaskier jumped up nimbly and slung his lute onto his back. "To the horses, gentlemen! And ladies!"

"Raise the barrier," the wealthy lieutenant with a promising career as a captain shouted to the halberdiers.

On the bridge, behind the barrier, Veia pulled on the reins. Her horse danced, the beat of its hooves resounding on the planks of the bridge. The girl, braids flitting in the wind, gave a piercing cry.

"Right, Veia!" Three Jackdaws replied. "Let's get to it Zerricanian! Like the wind in an uproar! "

IV

"So," declared the oldest of the Reavers. Boholt, imposing and powerful like the trunk of a thousand year old oak. "Apparently Niedamir did not scatter you to the four winds, noble lords. Though I could have sworn he

would have done so. Well in the end, it's not down to us, the commoners, to discuss royal decisions. Come and share the fire. Make a place, lads. Just between us, witcher, tell me the subject of your conversation with the king."

"We spoke of nothing," Geralt replied, leaning comfortably against his saddle positioned near the fire. "He didn't even come out of his tent to meet us. He only sent one of his footmen, what's his name..?"

"Gyllenstiern," Yarpén Zigrin told him, a stocky and bearded dwarf whose huge neck, tarry and covered with dust, shone in the light of fire. "A bombastic clown. An overfed pig. When we arrived, he put on lofty airs, drivelled on and on, 'remember well, dwarves,' he said, 'who commands here and to whom you owe obedience. It is King Niedamir who commands and his word is law,' and so on. I just listened, all the while wanting to send the boys in to throw him down and trample him into the ground. But I had self-control, you know. They only would have said that dwarves are dangerous, aggressive sons of bitches and that it's impossible for... for... as it's said, for the devil... to coexist or something like that. And there would have been another race riot in a small city. So I just listened politely, nodding my head."

"It seems from what you say that Sir Gyllenstiern doesn't know how to do anything else," Geralt continued, "because he dressed us down in exactly the same way. Of course, we also deferred to his opinion."

"In my opinion," another Reaver intervened as he deposited a large blanket onto a heap of firewood. "It's a pity that Niedamir didn't send you away. Everyone is hot on the heels of this dragon, it's incredible. The place is teeming. It's not an expedition any more, it's a funeral procession. I don't like to fight in a crowd."

"Calm down, Nischuka," Boholt cut in. "It's better for us to travel with one another. Haven't you ever hunted a dragon? There's always a whole crowd nearby, a veritable fair, a brothel on wheels. But when the reptile shows itself, you well know who stays put. Us. Nobody else."

Boholt remained silent for a moment. He drank a good mouthful from a demijohn covered with wicker and sniffed loudly. He then cleared his

throat:

"All the better," he continued, "as it so often happens that feasting and butchery begin just after the death of the dragon and before you know it heads are rolling like pears in an

orchard. When the treasure is found, the hunters launch themselves at one another's throats. Geralt? Huh? Am I right? Witcher, I'm telling you."

"I know of such cases," confirmed Geralt in a dry tone.

"You know, so you say. Perhaps from hearsay, because I have never heard of a witcher hunting a dragon. Your presence here is all the stranger."

"That's true," interjected Kennet, nicknamed Ripper, the youngest of the Reavers. "It is strange. And we..."

"Wait, Ripper, I'm the one doing the talking," Boholt interrupted him.

"Besides, I don't intend to dwell on the subject. The witcher already knows what I'm getting at. I know it and he also knows it. Our paths have never crossed before and never will again. Imagine, my lads, for example, that I want to disturb the witcher while he's doing his job or that I try to steal his dues from him. Would he not immediately strike me with his sword, and rightfully so? Am I right?"

Nobody confirmed or denied it. Boholt did not seem to be waiting especially for a reply.

"Yep," he went on, "It's better to travel with one another, I say. The witcher could prove to be useful. The area is wild and uninhabited. If a chimera, ilyocoris or striga happens upon us, we'll have problems. But if Geralt remains with us, we'll avoid these problems because it's his speciality. But the dragon is not his speciality. Right?"

Again, nobody confirmed or denied it.

"And Lord Three Jackdaws," Boholt continued, handing the demijohn to the leader of the dwarves, "is a companion of Geralt. This guarantee is enough

for me. Whose presence bothers you then, Nischuka and Ripper? Surely not Jaskier!"

"Jaskier," Yarpen Zigrin intervened, handing the demijohn to the bard, "is always found where something of interest is happening. Everybody knows that he neither helps nor hurts and that he never slows down operations. He's like a tick on a dog's tail. Don't you think so, boys?"

The 'boys', robust dwarfs, burst out laughing, making their beards tremble. Jaskier slid his hat back onto his neck and drank from the demijohn.

"Damn! This is strong," he groaned, gasping. "It'll make me lose my voice. What's it distilled from? Scorpions?"

"One thing I don't like, Geralt," said Ripper, taking the bottle out of the minstrel's hands. "Is that this magician is with you. There are already far too many."

"That's true," confirmed Yarpen. "Ripper is right. This Dorregaray is about as useful to us as a saddle on a pig. We already have our own sorceress, the noble Yennefer. Ugh!"

"Yes!" Boholt chimed in, scratching his bullish neck which he had just freed from a leather gorget, bristling with studs. "There are too many magicians hereabouts, my dear fellows, in the heat of the royal tent they conspire, these wily foxes: Niedamir, the sorceress, the

magician and Gyllenstiern. Yennefer is the worst of all. Do you know what they conspire about? How to rip us off, that's for sure!"

"And they stuff themselves with venison!" added Ripper with a despondent air. "And us, what do we eat? Marmots! The marmot, what is it, I ask you? A rat, nothing more than a rat. What do we eat? Rat!"

"That's nothing," Nischuka replied, "Soon we'll dine on dragon's tail. There's nothing like it when it's been braised over coals."

"Yennefer," continued Boholt, "is a totally despicable, vicious woman, a shrew. Nothing like your girls, Lord Borch, who certainly know how to behave and keep quiet. Look, they stayed near the horses to whet their swords. When I passed by them, I greeted them amiably. They smiled at me in return. I like them. They are not like Yennefer who schemes and connives. I'm telling you: we must watch out, because our contract could just be hot air."

"What kind of contract, Boholt?"

"Yarpen, can the witcher be put in the picture?"

"I don't see a problem with that," answered the dwarf.

"There's no booze left," Ripper interrupted them, turning the empty demijohn upside down.

"Get some more then. You're the youngest. The contract, Geralt, was our idea, because we aren't mercenaries or some other unscrupulous kind. Niedamir can't just send us into the dragon's clutches and then give us a pittance of gold pieces. The truth is that we don't need to slay the dragon for Niedamir. On the contrary, he needs us. In this situation, who has the most significant role and who should get the most silver are obvious questions. We therefore proposed a fair deal: those who will personally take part in the battle against the dragon will take half the treasure. Niedamir will take a quarter by virtue of birth and title. The others, if they contributed in any way to the enterprise, will equally share the last quarter. What do you think of it?"

"What did Niedamir think of it?"

"He answered neither yes nor no. It would be in his best interest to cooperate, that greenhorn, because I'm telling you: alone, he will never slay the dragon. Niedamir remains dependent on professionals, that's to say on us, the Reavers, as well as on Yarpen and his boys. It's us, and nobody else, that will come within a sword's length of the dragon. If any others help out, including magicians, they will be able to share a quarter of the treasure."

"Besides the magicians, who do you count amongst these others?" Jaskier asked with interest.

"Certainly not musicians and authors of trashy verse," Yarpen laughed. "We include those who toil with the axe, not with the lute."

"Ah good!" Three Jackdaws interjected, looking up at the starry sky. "And what did the shoemaker Kozojed and his band toil with?"

Yarpen Zigrin spat into the fire, muttering something in the language of the dwarves.

"The Holopole militia knows these shitty mountains and will be our guide," explained Boholt in a low voice. "It's fair to include them in distribution. As far as the shoemaker's concerned, that's a bit different. When a dragon arrives in a region, it's no good that the people think they can force-feed it poison with impunity then carry on screwing girls in the fields instead of calling professionals. If such a practice carried on, we'd be reduced to begging, wouldn't we?"

"That's true," replied Yarpen. "That's why I'm telling you: the shoemaker should be held responsible for that mess rather than be declared a legend."

"He's got it coming," punctuated Nischuka firmly. "I'll do it."

"And Jaskier," continued the dwarf, "can write a comedic ballad about it, so that his shame and ignominy can live on forever in song."

"You forgot an important element," said Geralt. "There is one who can confuse matters by refusing any payment or contract. I'm talking about Eyck of Denesle. Did you talk to him?"

"For what purpose?" Boholt murmured under his breath while stirring the fire with a branch. "Regarding Eyck, there's nothing to discuss, Geralt. He doesn't know what he's doing."

"We encountered him," Three Jackdaws said. "On the path leading to your camp. Kneeling on the stones, dressed in his complete armour, he was

gazing at the sky."

"He always does that," explained Ripper. "He meditates or prays. He says it's his divine mission to protect humans from evil."

"Back home, in Crinfrid," muttered Boholt, "They lock madmen such as him up in the in the back of a cowshed, tie them to a chain and when they give them a piece of coal, they draw marvellous pictures on the walls. But let's cease wasting time by endlessly discussing our fellows: let's talk business."

A young petite woman, with black hair covered with a gold mesh and dressed in a wool coat, silently entered the circle of light.

"What stinks so?" Yarpen Zigrin asked, pretending not to notice her. "Is it sulphur?"

"No." Boholt sniffed ostentatiously looking away "It's musk or some kind of incense."

"No, it's probably..." the dwarf grimaced: "Ah! It's the noble Lady Yennefer. Welcome, welcome!"

The sorceress' gaze slowly took in the gathered individuals. Her shining eyes stopped for one instant on the witcher. Geralt smiled slightly.

"May I sit?"

"But of course, benefactor," replied Boholt, hiccupping. "Take a seat, there near the saddle. Move over, Kennet my friend, and give your seat to the sorceress."

"My Lords, I hear that you're talking business." Yennefer sat down, stretching out in front of her shapely legs sheathed in black stockings. "Without me?"

"We wouldn't dare bother such an important person," replied Yarpen Zigrin.

Yennefer blinked, turning to the dwarf:

"You, Yarpén, you would better off being silent. Since the first day we met you've treated me like a bad smell. Now please continue and don't mind me. It doesn't bother me in the least."

"What are you saying, fair lady?" Yarpén smiled showing a row of uneven teeth. "Leeches devour me if I do not treat you better than a bad smell. I sometimes pollute the air, but I would never dare to do so in your presence."

The bearded 'boys' burst out laughing. They were immediately silent at the sight of a grey light which had formed around the sorceress.

"Another word out of you and you'll be polluted air, Yarpén," Yennefer shot back at him in a metallic voice. "And a black stain on the grass."

"Very well" Boholt broke the silence which had just descended with a cough. "Be silent, Zigrin. Let us hear what Lady Yennefer wants to tell us. She regrets that our business discussion is taking place without her. I deduce from this that she has a proposal to make to us. Let's listen, my dear fellows, to what this proposal consists of. However, let's hope that she doesn't offer to slay the dragon alone with her spells."

"Why not?" Yennefer reacted, raising her head. "Do you think it impossible, Boholt?"

"It is perhaps possible. But for us not very lucrative, because you would then demand half of the dragon's treasure."

"At the very least," the sorceress replied coldly.

"You see that's not a good solution. We, madam, are only poor warriors. If we don't get paid, hunger threatens. We've only been eating sorrel and white goose..."

"After a festival, sometimes marmot," added Yarpén Zigrin in a sad voice.

"... We drink only water." Boholt drank a good draught from the demijohn and snorted. "For us, Lady Yennefer, there's no other solution. We get paid

or it's death outside in the icy cold winter. Because the inns are so expensive."

"Beer too," added Nischuka.

"And the whores," continued Ripper, dreamily.

"That's why we're going to try to slay the dragon without your spells and without your help."

"Are you sure about that? Remember that there are limits as to how to go about it, Boholt."

"There are perhaps. I've never encountered them for my part. No, madam. I repeat: we shall kill the dragon ourselves, without your spells."

"What's more" added Yarpén Zigrin, "spells, too, are subject to certain limits."

"Did you figure this out by yourself?" Yennefer asked slowly. "Perhaps somebody else has told you? Does the presence of a witcher at this so noble gathering explain your egotism?"

"No," replied Boholt looking at Geralt who pretended to be dozing, lazily stretched out on a blanket, his head resting on his saddle. "The witcher has got nothing to do with this. Listen, dear Lady Yennefer. We offered a proposal to the king and he has not honoured us with the answer. We'll wait patiently till morning. If the king accepts, we'll continue on our way together. Otherwise, we shall leave."

"Us too," murmured the dwarf.

"No possible negotiation," Boholt went on. "Take it or leave it. Please repeat these words to Niedamir, dear Yennefer. And I'll also add that the deal could be favourable to you, to you and also to Dorregaray, if you agree with the king. We don't care about the dragon's carcass. We want only the tail. All rest will be yours. You have only to help yourself. We shall claim neither the teeth nor the brain: nothing of interest to magicians."

"Of course," added Yarpén Zigrin, sneering, "you can also have the carrion. Nobody's going to steal that from you, except perhaps the vultures."

Yennefer got up, drawing her coat around her shoulders.

"Niedamir will not wait until the morning," she announced firmly. "He accepts your conditions forthwith. In spite of my advice, as you suspected, and that of Dorregaray."

"Niedamir," stated Boholt slowly, "has proved himself of sound judgment for such a young king. Because for me, Lady Yennefer, the wise show an ability to remain deaf to the advice of stupid or hypocritical people."

Yarpén Zigrin sniggered. The sorceress put her hands on her hips and retorted:

"You'll be singing another tune tomorrow when the dragon falls upon you, skewers you to the ground and breaks your legs. You'll kiss my arse and beg me to help you. As usual. I know you well, as I know all those of your kind. I know you so you well, it makes me sick."

She turned and walked away into the darkness, without saying goodbye.

"In my time," said Yarpén Zigrin, "magicians remained locked up in their towers. They read learned books and mixed potions in their cauldrons with a spatula without sticking their noses into the affairs of warriors. They minded their own business without flaunting their arses at all the boys."

"And a very pretty arse it is too, to be frank," added Jaskier, tuning his lute. "Eh, Geralt? Geralt? Where's the witcher gone?"

"What's it to us?" Boholt grumbled, feeding the fire with some more wood. "He left. Perhaps to satisfy the usual needs, my dear lords. That's his business."

"Of course," replied the bard, playing a chord on his lute. "What would you say to a song?"

"Sing, damn it," Yarpen Zigrin grumbled, spitting, "but don't expect that I'll give you a shilling for your bleating, Jaskier. This is not the royal court, my lad."

"That's for sure," replied the troubadour, shaking his head.

V

"Yennefer."

She feigned astonishment as she turned around. The witcher knew that she had heard his footsteps from afar. She deposited a wooden bowl on the ground and lifted her head, pushing back a lock of hair which fell across her forehead. Her curly tresses, now freed from the gold mesh, cascaded onto her shoulders.

"Geralt."

As usual, she wore only two colours - white and black. Her hair and long black eyelashes invited a guess as to the colour of her eyes, which they hid. A black dress, a small black jerkin with a white fur collar. A white shirt of fine linen. Around her neck, on a black velvet ribbon adorned with small diamonds, was a star of obsidian.

"You haven't changed, Yennefer."

"Neither have you." Her lips tightened in a line. "And in both cases, nothing more normal than that. Or, if you prefer, nothing more abnormal. But talking about the effects of time on our appearance, even if it is a very good means to start conversation, is slightly absurd, don't you think?"

"That's true."

He raised his head, looking to the side of Niedamir's tent at the fires of the royal archers, who were hidden by the dark silhouettes of the wagons.

At a fire located farther away, they heard the tuneful voice of Jaskier singing *Stars Above the Road*, one of his most successful romantic ballads.

"Indeed," said the sorceress, "preamble over, what do you have to say? I'm listening."

"You see, Yennefer..."

"I see," she interrupted him wildly, "but I don't understand. What's the reason for your presence here Geralt? Certainly not the dragon. From that point of view, I imagine nothing has changed."

"No. Nothing changed there."

"Then why did you join us?"

"If I tell you that it's because of you, would you believe me?"

She looked at him in silence. Her bright eyes expressed something unpleasant.

"I believe you," she said finally. "Why not? Men like to see their former lovers again to reminisce about the good old times. They take pleasure in imagining that their bygone love affairs assure them a perpetual right of possession on their ex-partners. It's good for their self-esteem. You're no exception, apparently."

"Apparently" he replied, smiling. "You're right, Yennefer. The sight of you has boosted my self-esteem. In other words, I'm happy to see again you."

"Is that all? Oh well, let's say that I'm also happy to see you again. And now we're both contented, I wish you good night. I'm going to bed. Before that, I intend to have a bath and so need to undress. I kindly ask you to go away to grant me a minimum of privacy."

"Yen."

He reached out to her.

"Don't call me that!" she hissed furiously, drawing back. Blue and red sparks flew from her fingers which the sorceress aimed at him. "And if you touch me, I'll burn out your eyes, you bastard."

The witcher backed off. The sorceress, somewhat composed, pushed back her hair which had fallen across her forehead. She stood before him, resting her hands on her hips.

"What were you thinking, Geralt? That we would talk casually and cheerfully? That we would remember the old times? That after this conversation we would go to lie down in a wagon and make love on the furs... just like that, just to refresh our memories? Is that it?"

Geralt, not sure whether the sorceress knew how to read thoughts or just successfully guessed them, remained silent and smiled crookedly.

"These past four years did their job, Geralt. I overcame the pain at last. It's only for this reason that I did not spit in your face as soon as I saw you. But don't let my courtesy deceive you."

"Yennefer..."

"Silence! I gave more to you than I have to any other man, you piece of shit. I didn't know myself why I had chosen you. And you... Oh no, my dear. I'm neither a whore nor an elf met at random on a forest path that you can run out on the following morning without waking, leaving a bunch of violets on the table. A girl you can turn into a laughing stock. Watch out! If you say even one word, you could end up regretting it."

Geralt did not say a word as he sensed Yennefer's seething anger. The sorceress once again pushed the insubordinate curls from her forehead. She looked him closely in the eye.

"We met. Too bad," she continued in a low voice. "We're not going to put on a show for the others. Let's preserve our dignity. Let's pretend to be good friends. But don't be mistaken, Geralt: between us there is nothing more than that. Nothing more, do you understand? And rejoice because it means that I've abandoned some plans I've been cooking up for you. But it doesn't mean that I forgive you. I shall never forgive you, witcher. Never."

She turned wildly, grabbing her bowl so violently that she splashed herself with water, and disappeared behind a wagon.

Geralt shooed away a mosquito which flitted around his ear making an irritating noise. He slowly took the path back to the fire where sparse applause expressed approval for Jaskier's singing.

He looked at the dark blue sky gaping above the black, jagged crest of the mountains. He wanted to laugh. He didn't know why.

VI

"Watch out there! Pay attention!" shouted Boholt, turning round in the driver's seat towards the rest of the column behind him. "You're too near the rocks! Look out!"

The wagons moved onward behind each other, bouncing along on the stones. The drivers swore and cracked their whips; anxious, they leaned over to check that the wheels remained a respectable distance from the ravine and always in contact with the narrow, uneven path. Down in the bottom of the chasm, the River Braa bubbled with white foam between the rocks.

Geralt kept his horse very close to the stony wall covered in patches of brown moss and white blooms of lichen. He allowed the Reavers' wagon to pass. At the head of column, Ripper led the train along with the scouts of Holopole.

"Good!" he called "Make some effort! The way becomes broader."

King Niedamir and Gyllenstiern caught up with Geralt on their chargers. Several archers on horseback flanked them. Behind them, all the royal wagons followed, making a deafening noise. Far behind them followed that of the dwarves, driven by Yarpén Zigrin, swearing incessantly. Niedamir, a thin and freckled lad in a white sheepskin coat, passed the Witcher, shooting him an arrogant, but clearly bored look. Gyllenstiern straightened up, stopping his mount.

"If you please, Sir Witcher," he shot with an air of superiority.

"I'm listening."

Geralt spurred on his mare and rode alongside the chancellor behind the wagons. He was surprised that with such a fat gut, Gyllenstiern preferred riding a horse rather than in the comfort of a wagon.

Gyllenstiern pulled lightly on his reins adorned with golden studs and pushed a turquoise coat off his shoulders.

"Yesterday, you said that dragons did not interest you. In what, therefore, are you interested, Sir Witcher? Why do you travel this road with us?"

"It's a free country, Lord Chancellor."

"At the present time, Lord Geralt, everybody in this convoy must know his place and his role in accordance with the will of King Niedamir. Do you understand?"

"What are you getting at, Lord Gyllenstiern?"

"I'm already there. Lately I have heard that it is difficult to come to an agreement with you witchers. It seems that when somebody asks a witcher to kill a monster, he prefers to meditate

on the legitimacy of this act rather than to just take up his sword and kill it. He wishes to consider the boundaries of what is acceptable by wondering whether the killing, in this particular case, does not contradict with his ethical code and if the monster is indeed a monster - as though it were not obvious at first glance. I think that your financial security hinders you: in my time, witchers did not stink of money. The only stench was from the bandages with which they covered their feet. There was never the slightest hint of procrastination: they killed whatever they had been ordered to kill, that's it. It didn't matter whether it was a werewolf, a dragon or a tax collector. Only the effectiveness of the job. What do you think, Geralt?"

"Do you want to entrust me with a mission, Gyllenstiern?" replied the witcher roughly. "I await your proposal. We shall make a decision then. But if that's not case, there's no point in waffling on like this, is there?"

"A mission?" the chancellor sighed. "No, I don't have one for you. Today we hunt the dragon and apparently it exceeds your abilities, witcher. I fancy that the Reavers will fulfil this task. I simply wanted to keep you informed. Pay close attention: King Niedamir and I will not tolerate this type of fanciful dichotomy consisting of separating monsters into good and bad. We don't want to hear, and even less to see, how witchers apply this principle. Do not meddle in royal business, Lord, and cease conspiring with Dorregaray."

"I'm not in the habit of collaborating with magicians. How did you come to such a hypothesis?"

"The fancies of Dorregaray," replied Gyllenstiern, "exceed even those of the witchers. He goes beyond your dualistic dichotomy by considering that all monsters are good!"

"He exaggerates a bit."

"There's no doubt about that. But he defends his views with amazing tenacity. Frankly I wouldn't be surprised if he's up to something. It's odd that he's joined this strange company

"I don't really like Dorregaray; the feeling's mutual."

"Don't interrupt me! I must say your presence here seems strange to me: a witcher with more scruples than there are fleas nesting in the coat of a fox; a magician who never stops spouting druidic incongruities regarding the balance of nature; a silent knight, Borch Three-Jackdaws and his escort from Zerricania - where, as everybody knows, they make sacrifices before effigies of dragons. And they all suddenly join our hunt. It's strange, don't you find?"

"If you say so, yes."

"Know then," the chancellor went on, "that as is so often the case, the most difficult problems always result in the simplest resolution. Do not force me to use to it, witcher."

"I don't understand."

"You understand. You understand only too well. Thank you for this conversation, Geralt."

The witcher halted his mount. Gyllenstiern sped up his pace to join the king behind the wagons. Eyck of Denesle, dressed in a jerkin stitched with pale leather still carrying the

impression of a breast-plate, passed by at walking pace leading a sleepy horse loaded with armour and carrying a silver shield and a powerful lance. Geralt waved to him, but the knight errant looked away, pursing his lips, before spurring his horse onwards.

"He doesn't like you very much," said Dorregaray, joining Geralt. "Don't you think?"

"Apparently."

"He's a rival isn't he? You both lead a similar activity. The difference being that the knight Eyck is an idealist and you a professional. The difference of no importance to the beings whom you slaughter."

"Don't compare me to Eyck, Dorregaray. Who knows which of us two would come off worse as a result of your comparison."

"As you wish. To tell the truth, to me you are just as loathsome as he is."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it." The magician patted the neck of his horse, frightened by the shouting of Yarpen and his dwarves. "As far as I'm concerned, witcher, to make murder a vocation is disgusting, base and stupid. Our world hangs in the balance. The destruction, the murder of any living being in this world threatens this balance. The absence of equilibrium leads to extinction, and thus the end of the world as we know it."

"Druid theory," declared Geralt. "I know of it. An old hierophant introduced me to it before, in Rivia. Two days after our conversation, rat-men tore him

to shreds. It wasn't evident that any kind imbalance had occurred as a result."

Dorregaray looked at Geralt indifferently.

"The world, I repeat, remains in balance. A natural balance. Every species has its enemies, each is a natural enemy for the others. This fact also applies to human beings. The complete destruction of the natural enemies of man - to which you contribute, Geralt, as we can see - threatens our degenerate race."

"You know, magician," replied the witcher, losing his temper, "Perhaps you should visit a mother whose son has been devoured by a basilisk and explain to her that she should be delighted with her misfortune, because it will enable the salvation of the degenerate human race. Wait and see how she answers you."

"Good argument, witcher," interrupted Yennefer, who had joined them on her big black horse. "Dorregaray, be careful about what you say."

"I'm not in the habit of keeping my opinions to myself."

Yennefer slipped between the two. The witcher noticed that she had replaced her golden mesh with a white neckerchief rolled into a headband.

"Consider suppressing them, Dorregaray," she replied. "At least in front of Niedamir and the Reavers, who suspect you of wanting to sabotage the hunt. They will continue treating you as an inoffensive maniac as long as you restrict yourself to words. But if you try to do something, they will break your neck before you have time to take a breath."

The magician smiled contemptuously.

"Besides," continued Yennefer, "by uttering such views, you undermine the foundations of our profession and our duty."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You can apply your theories to grand creation and vermin, Dorregaray, but not to dragons. Dragons remain the worst natural enemy of man. It's not a matter of the degeneration of humanity, but its survival. In the end, mankind must get rid of his enemies and anything else that threatens it."

"Dragons are not the enemies of man," interrupted Geralt.

The sorceress looked at him and smiled, only with her lips.

"On this issue," she replied, "leave the discussion to us humans. You, witcher, are not made to judge. You are only there to carry out certain tasks."

"As a servile and programmed golem?"

"Your words, not mine," she retorted coldly, "even if I consider them, it could be said, rather appropriate."

"Yennefer," said Dorregaray. "For a woman of your age and education to talk such nonsense is shocking. Why would dragons appear among the main enemies of man? Why not other living beings with a hundred times more victims than dragons? Why not hirikkhis, giant centipedes, manticores, amphisbaena or griffons? Why not wolves?"

"Let me tell you. The superiority of man over other breeds and species, the fight for his rightful place in nature, his vital place, will only succeed when man has put an end to his aggressive, nomadic search for food, where he moves about in accordance with the changing of the seasons. Otherwise, it will be impossible for him to multiply quickly enough. Humanity is a child without any real independence. A woman can only give birth safely sheltered by the walls of a city or a fortified town. Fertility, Dorregaray, is what's needed for development, survival and domination. Then we come to dragons: only a dragon can threaten a city or fortified town, no other monster. If dragons are not exterminated, humans will scatter to ensure their security instead of uniting against it. If a dragon breathes fire on a densely populated quarter, it's a catastrophe - a terrible massacre with hundreds of victims. That's why every last dragon must be wiped out."

Dorregaray looked at her with a strange smile on his lips.

"You know, Yennefer, I'd prefer not be alive when the time comes that your idea of man's domination will come true and the time when the same will take up their rightful place in nature. Fortunately, it will never arrive. You will consume each other, you will poison yourselves, you will succumb to fever and typhus, because it will be filth and lice, not dragons, that will threaten your splendid cities where the women give birth every year, but where only one newborn baby out of ten will succeed in living more than ten days. Yes, Yennefer, of course: breeding, breeding and more breeding. Take care, my dear, go and make some babies, as it's a more natural function with which to occupy yourself rather than wasting time spouting nonsense. Goodbye."

The magician spurred on his horse and left at a gallop to join the head of the column.

Seeing Yennefer's pale and tense face, Geralt instantly felt sorry for the magician. He grasped situation perfectly: Yennefer was sterile, as were most sorceresses, but unlike the others, she suffered as a result and became wild with rage when reminded of it. Dorregaray undoubtedly knew this weakness. He was, however, unaware that Yennefer had a cold-blooded thirst for vengeance.

"He's going to make trouble," she hissed. "Oh, yes! Watch out, Geralt. If it comes to that, don't hope that I'll defend you if you don't exhibit some common sense."

"Don't worry," he replied, smiling. "We witchers and servile golems always act reasonably. The limitations within which we can act are clearly and distinctly fixed."

"Look at you!" Yennefer's face turned even paler. "You're as upset as a girl who's just had her lack of virtue exposed. You're a witcher, you can't change that. Your duty... "

"Stop going on about my duty, Yen. This argument is starting to make me sick."

"Don't speak to me like that, I'm warning you. Your nausea as well as your restricted range of actions are of no interest to me."

"You'll witness some of them, however, if you don't cease bating me with grand ethics and talk of the struggle for the good of humanity. Or talk about dragons, dreadful enemies of the human tribe. I know better."

"Oh yes?" The sorceress blinked. "What do you know about it, witcher?"

"I know this." Geralt ignored the violent warning of the medallion hanging around his neck. "If dragons didn't protect treasure, not even lame dogs would be interested in their fate. Magicians even less so. It's interesting to note that, in every hunt for a dragon, there is the presence of magicians who are strongly linked to the guild of jewellers. Yourself, for example. Later, while the market is saturated with stones, the ones from the dragon's hoard disappear as if by magic and their price remains constantly inflated. Therefore don't talk to me about duty and battles for survival of the species. I know you too well and for too long."

"Too long," she repeated with a hostile air, grimacing. "Unfortunately. But don't think that you know me well, you son of a bitch. Damn it, what a fool I was... Go to hell! I can't look at you anymore,"

She cried out, launching her dark horse into a flat-out gallop towards the head of the convoy. The witcher stopped his mount to let through the wagon of the dwarves who shouted, swore and played on bone flutes. Among them, sprawled out on some bags of oats, Jaskier strummed his lute.

"Hey!" cried Yarpen Zigrin from the driver's seat, pointing at Yennefer. "What's that black thing on the path? I'm curious, whatever can it be? It resembles a mare!"

"Undoubtedly!" replied Jaskier, shouting and pushing back his plum coloured hat. "It's a mare riding a gelding! Incredible!"

The beards of Yarpen's boys shook with a chorus of laughter. Yennefer pretended not to hear them.

Geralt stopped his horse to let Niedamir's archers through. Behind them, a little way off, Borch rode slowly and right behind him, bringing up the rear guard, the Zerricanians. Geralt waited for them. He positioned his mare next to Borch's horse. They rode on in silence.

"Witcher," Three Jackdaws said suddenly. "I'd like to ask you a question."

"Ask away."

"Why don't you turn back?"

The witcher looked at him in silence for a while.

"You really want to know?"

"Yes," replied Three Jackdaws, turning to him.

"I walk in the column because I'm only a servile golem, only a strand of oakum carried by the wind on the highway. Where should I go? Tell me. For what purpose? In this company there are plenty of people to talk to. Some don't even cut short their conversations when I approach them. Those that don't like me tell me to my face, rather than talking behind my back. I accompany them for the same reason that I went with you in the bargemen's inn. Because it's all the same to me. I'm not expected to be anywhere in particular. There's nothing for me at the end of the road."

Three Jackdaws cleared his throat.

"At the end of every path, there is a goal, a purpose. Everybody has one. Even you, in spite of your difference."

"It is now my turn to ask you a question."

"Go for it."

"Do you see a goal at the end of your path?"

"I see one."

"Lucky."

"It's not a question of luck, Geralt. It's all a matter of what you believe and to what you devote yourself. Nobody can know this better than... What witcher?"

"Nobody stops talking about their ambitions today," murmured Geralt. "The ambition of Niedamir consists of conquering Malleore. That of Eyck of Denesle to protect the humans from dragons. Dorregaray feels called to accomplish a diametrically opposite purpose. Yennefer cannot fulfil her ambition owing to the changes to which her body has been subjected, and it upsets her. By the devil, only the Reavers and the dwarves seem not to need ambition. They simply want to make a packet. Perhaps that's why they appeal to me. "

"No, Geralt of Rivia, it is not they who appeal to you. I'm neither blind nor deaf. You didn't take out your purse to the soft music of their name. It seems to me that..."

"It's in vain," the witcher said without anger.

"I'm sorry."

"No need to apologise."

They stopped their mounts to avoid a collision with the archers of Caingorn who had stopped at the head of the column.

"What's happened?" Geralt stood up in his stirrups. "Why have we stopped?"

"I don't know," replied Borch, looking around.

Vea uttered something, looking strangely worried.

"I'm going to the front," declared the witcher. "I'll find out."

"Wait."

"Why?"

Three Jackdaws remained silent, staring at the ground.

"Why?" repeated Geralt.

"On second thought, go," Borch said finally. "I think perhaps it will be better to."

"Why will it be better?"

"Go."

The bridge linking up both edges of precipice seemed solid. It had been constructed with imposing logs of pine resting on a square pillar against which the current broke with crash in long rivulets of foam.

"Hey, Ripper!" shouted Boholt, approaching the wagon. "Why have you stopped?"

"I'm not sure about this bridge."

"Why are we going this way?" Gyllenstiern asked, going up to them. "I'm not keen on crossing this bridge with the wagons. Hey! Shoemaker! Why go this way? The track goes on farther westward!"

The heroic poisoner of Holopole went up to him and took off his sheepskin hat. He cut a comical air in his frockcoat covered with an old-fashioned breast-plate dating from at least the time of King Sambuk.

"This way is shorter, noble lord," he replied not to the chancellor but directly to Niedamir, whose face still expressed deathly boredom.

How's that?" demanded Gyllenstiern, his face contorted.

Niedamir did not deign to look at the shoemaker.

"Well," explained Kozojed, indicating the three jagged summits dominating the area. "Over there are Chiava, Big Kestrel and Steed's Tooth. The track

leads towards the ruins of an ancient fortified town, winds around Chiava to the north, and carries on beyond the source of the river. By taking the bridge, we can shorten the way. We can follow the ravine up to a body of water located between the mountains. If we find no trace of the dragon there, we can head eastward to examine the adjacent gulches. Even farther eastward, there are flat mountain pastures, then a path leading directly to Caingorn, towards your domains, lord."

"How did this knowledge of mountains come to you, Kozojed?" Boholt asked. "While planing down clogs?"

"No, lord. I was a shepherd in my youth."

"The bridge will hold?" Boholt got up from his seat and looked down at the foaming river. "The chasm is forty fathoms deep."

"It will hold, my lord."

"How do you explain the presence of such a bridge in this wild land?"

"The trolls," explained Kozojed, "constructed this bridge in ancient times to set up a toll. Whoever wanted to cross had to pay a hefty sum. But there were rarely any takers, so the trolls packed up and left. The bridge remained."

"I repeat," Gyllenstiern interrupted angrily, "that we've wagons filled with equipment and food just in case we get stuck in the wilderness. Isn't it better to stay on the track?"

"We can follow the track," replied the shoemaker, shrugging, "but the road will be longer. The king had expressed his eagerness to battle the dragon. He beamed with impatience."

"Burned with impatience," corrected the chancellor.

"Burned then." the shoemaker acquiesced. "All the same, the road will be shorter if we take the bridge."

"Well, let's go, Kozojed!" decided Boholt. "Forward march, you and your troops. Where I'm from we have a habit of sending the most valiant first."

"No more than one wagon at a time!" Gyllenstiern ordered.

"Agreed!" Boholt whipped his horses: the wagon clattered onto the logs of the bridge. "Look behind us, Ripper! Watch out that our wheels go straight."

Geralt stopped his horse, his way barred by the archers of Niedamir, their crimson and yellow jerkins huddled together on a stone gable.

The witcher's mare snorted.

Then the earth shook. The jagged edge of the rocky walls suddenly blurred against the background of the sky and the wall itself issued a dull, palpable roar.

"Look out!" shouted Boholt, who had already crossed to the other side of the bridge. "Look out!"

The first stones, still small, began rustling and hitting the slope as it shook with spasms. Geralt saw a black fissure forming across the path behind him. It broke and collapsed into space with a deafening crash.

"To the horses!" shouted Gyllenstiern. "My lords! We have to cross quickly!"

Niedamir, his head leaning on the mane of his mount, rushed onto the bridge followed by Gyllenstiern and some of the archers. Behind them, the royal wagon bearing a standard marked with a griffin crashed with a dull thud onto the faltering beams.

"It's a landslide! Get off the path!" shouted Yarpen Zigrin in the back as he whipped the hindquarters of his horses.

The dwarves' wagon crashed into some of the archers as it overtook Niedamir's second wagon.

"Move! Witcher! Get out of the way!"

Eyck of Denesle, sitting stiff and straight, overtook the dwarves' wagon at a gallop. If it wasn't for his deathly pale face and jaw clenched in grimace, one might think that the knight errant didn't notice the rocks and stones tumbling down onto the track. A wild cry went up from a group of archers who remained behind. Horses neighed.

Geralt tugged on the reins, his horse rearing. Just in front of him, the earth trembled under the impact of the rocks that hurtled down the slope.

Rumbling over the stones, the dwarves' wagon jolted just before it reached the bridge and overturned with a crack. One of its axles broke and a wheel bounced off the balustrade before falling into the turbulence.

The witcher's mare, struck by shards of sharp rock, chewed at the bit. Geralt tried to jump from his mount, but his boot remained stuck in the stirrup. He fell. The mare neighed and rushed onto the bridge as it wobbled over the gap. The dwarves ran across shouting and swearing.

"Faster, Geralt!" Jaskier shouted over his shoulder as he ran behind the dwarves.

"Jump, witcher!" shouted Dorregaray, jostling around in the saddle and struggling to control his now wild horse.

Behind them, a whole section of path collapsed. A cloud of dust went up, created by the landslide and the crashing of Niedamir's wagons as they broke to pieces. The witcher managed to hang on to the straps of the magician's saddlebags. He heard a scream.

Yennefer fell with her horse, then rolled aside. She threw herself to the ground and protected her head with her hands, trying to remain out of reach of the hooves that kicked out blindly. The witcher let go to rush toward her, avoiding a rain of stones and jumping over the fissures which formed under his feet. Clutching an injured shoulder, Yennefer rose to her knees. Her eyes were wide and there was a cut above her eyebrow. Blood trickled down to her earlobe.

"Get up, Yen!"

"Geralt, look out!"

An enormous block of rock, which had broken loose from the wall with a grating noise, came down directly behind them with a thud. Geralt dropped to shield the sorceress with his body. The block exploded and broke into thousands of fragments as fine as wasp stings.

"Hurry!" cried Dorregaray. From his horse, he waved his wand, reducing to dust the other rocks that had come loose from the wall. "To the bridge, witcher!"

Yennefer made a sign with her hand, stretching out her fingers. Nobody understood what she shouted. Stones evaporated like raindrops on white-hot iron upon the bluish arch which had just formed above their heads.

"To the bridge, Geralt!" cried the sorceress. "Follow me!"

They ran behind Dorregaray and some unhorsed archers. The bridge swayed and cracked, beams bending, throwing them from one balustrade to the next.

"Quickly!"

The bridge collapsed all at once with a deafening racket. The half that they had just crossed tore itself apart and fell with a crash into the void, taking with it the dwarves' wagon which smashed onto a row of rocks. They heard the dreadful neighing of the panicked horses. The party that remained on the bridge continued holding on, but Geralt realized that they ran on an increasingly steep slope. Yennefer, breathing heavily, cursed.

"We're falling, Yen! Hold on!"

The rest of the bridge creaked, split apart and swung down like a drawbridge. Yennefer and Geralt slid, their fingers clutching at the cracks between the log. Realizing that she was gradually losing her grip, the sorceress gave a shriek. Holding on with one hand, Geralt drew his dagger with the other and drove it into a crack before hanging on to it with both hands. The joints of his elbows started to strain as Yennefer held on tightly

to his sword belt and scabbard that he wore across his back. The bridge gave way and tilted more and more towards the vertical.

"Yen," groaned the witcher. "Do something... damn it. Cast a spell!"

"How?" she replied in a low, hot-tempered growl. "I'm holding on with both hands!"

"Free one of your hands."

"I can't..."

"Hey!" shouted Jaskier from higher up. "Can you hang on? Hey!"

Geralt didn't consider it helpful to reply.

"Throw a rope!" demanded Jaskier. "Quickly, god damn it!"

The Reavers, the dwarves and Gyllenstiern appeared beside Jaskier. Geralt heard the muffled voice of Boholt:

"Wait a minute. She'll fall soon. We'll pull the witcher up afterwards."

Yennefer hissed like a snake as she clung to Geralt's back. The bandolier bit into the witcher's torso painfully.

"Yen? Can you get a hold? Can you use your feet?"

"Yes," she groaned. "In theory."

Geralt looked down at the river boiling between the sharp stones against which rolled a few logs from the bridge, the body of a horse and a corpse dressed in the vivid colours of Caingorn. Amongst the rocks, in the emerald, transparent depths, he saw a body of huge trout moving against the flow.

"Can you hold on, Yen?"

"Somewhat... yes..."

"Pull yourself up. You must get a handhold."

"No... I can't..."

"Throw a rope!" shouted Jaskier. "Have you all gone mad? They're both going to fall!"

"Wouldn't that be for the best?" murmured Gyllenstiern quietly.

The bridge trembled and tilted even more. Geralt began to lose all feeling in his fingers as he gripped the handle of his dagger.

"Yen..."

"Shut up... and stop fidgeting..."

"Yen?"

"Don't call me that..."

"Can you hold on?"

"No," she replied coldly.

She no longer struggled, she just hung on his back; dead, inert weight.

"Yen?"

"Shut up."

"Yen. Forgive me."

"No. Never."

Something slid along the beams, very quickly, like a snake.

Radiating a cold and pale light, wriggling and writhing as though it were alive, gracefully groping about with its mobile end, the rope found Geralt's neck, wormed its way under his armpits then formed a loose knot. Below

Geralt, the sorceress moaned and caught her breath. The witcher was sure that she was going to burst into tears. He was mistaken.

"Look out!" Jaskier shouted above. "We'll hoist you up! Nischuka! Kennet! Pull! Heave-ho!"

The rope jerked and tightened around them painfully, making it hard to breathe. Yennefer signed heavily. They were pulled up quickly, scraping against the wooden beams.

Above, Yennefer got to her feet first.

VII

"Out of the whole fleet," announced Gyllenstiern, "we saved only a baggage wagon, Majesty, not including that of the Reavers. Of the escort, only seven archers have survived. On the other side of precipice, the path has completely disappeared. As far as we can see, to the curve of the cliff, nothing but a pile of rocks and a smooth wall remain. It's not known if all the individuals present on the bridge at the time of its collapse still live."

Niedamir did not answer. Standing to attention in front of him, Eyck of Denesle fixed him with a fevered gaze.

"We are incurring the Wrath of the Gods," said the knight, raising his arms. "We have sinned, King Niedamir. It was to be a crusade; a crusade against evil. Because the dragon is evil, yes, every dragon is evil incarnate. Evil is nothing to me: I'll crush it under my foot... destroy it... yes, just as is commanded by the Gods and Holy Scripture."

"Is he delirious?" said Boholt, becoming sullen.

"I don't know," replied Geralt, readjusting his mare's harness. "I didn't understand a thing he said."

"Hush," demanded Jaskier "I'm trying to memorize his words. They might be able to serve me for my rhymes."

"The Holy Book says," Eyck continued, all in a rage, "that a serpent shall appear from the chasm, a dreadful dragon with seven heads and ten horns. On its hindquarters shall sit a woman dressed in purple and scarlet, a golden chalice in her hands, and on her forehead shall be inscribed the mark of her profound and complete debasement!"

"I knew it!" interrupted Jaskier merrily. "It's Cilia, the wife of Burgrave Sommerhalder!"

"Keep quiet, sir poet," Gyllenstiern commanded. "And you, Knight of Denesle, speak further, by the grace of the Gods."

"In order to fight evil," continued Eyck with grandiloquence, "it is necessary for oneself to have a pure heart and conscience with head held high! But whom do we see here? Dwarves, pagans who are born in blackness and revere dark powers! Blasphemous magicians, assuming divine right, power and privilege! A witcher, odious mutant, accursed and unnatural creation. Are you therefore surprised that punishment smites us? Let us cease

pushing the limits of divine grace! I urge you, O King, that you purge this vermin from our ranks before..."

"Not even a single word about me," Jaskier interrupted him, complaining. "No word about poets. And yet I tried my best!"

Geralt smiled at Yarpen Zigrin who stroked the sharp edge of the axe that hung on his belt with a slow and steady movement. Amused, the dwarf grinned. Yennefer turned her back on the scene ostentatiously, showing greater concern for her dress which had torn up to the hip than for the words of Eyck.

"We perhaps went a little too far," Dorregaray granted, "but for noble reasons, Lord Eyck, without a doubt. I consider, however, your comments regarding magicians, dwarves and witchers unseemly, even if we're used to these types of opinions they are neither polite nor worthy of a knight, Lord Eyck. And I will also add: all the less comprehensible as it was you, and no one else, who a short while ago ran up and threw the magical elven rope

which saved the witcher and the sorceress from certain death. From what you're now saying, I don't understand why you didn't pray for them to fall instead."

"Bloody hell," murmured Geralt to Jaskier. "It's him who brought the rope? Eyck? Not Dorregaray?"

"No," muttered the bard. "It was definitely Eyck."

Geralt shook his head in disbelief. Yennefer cursed under her breath and straightened up.

"Knight Eyck," she said to him with a smile that all, except Geralt, believed kind and benevolent. "Can you explain why? I am vermin, but you saved my life?"

"You are a lady, dear Yennefer." The knight bowed stiffly. "Your charming and sincere face makes me think that one day you will break free of your accursed magic."

Boholt snorted.

"I thank you, sir knight," Yennefer replied coldly. "The witcher Geralt also thanks you. Thank him Geralt."

"The devil take me first," replied the witcher with absolute sincerity. "Why should I thank him? I'm only a detestable mutant whose vile face brooks no improvement. The Knight Eyck pulled me from the void by accident, only because I was stubbornly held by a lady. If I'd been alone, Eyck wouldn't even have lifted his little finger. Am I mistaken, knight?"

"You are mistaken, Lord Geralt," replied the knight errant serenely. "I never refuse assistance to those that need it. Even a witcher."

"Thank him, Geralt. And beg his forgiveness," the sorceress told him firmly. "Otherwise, you confirm all that Eyck says about you. You don't know how to live with others because you're different. Your presence in this expedition is a mistake. An absurd purpose brings you here. It would be more

reasonable for us to leave. I think that you understand this yourself. If not, it's high time that you did understand it."

"What purpose are you talking about, madam?" Gyllenstiern intervened.

The sorceress looked at him without answering. Jaskier and Yarpén Zigrin smiled at each other significantly, but so as not to be seen by the sorceress.

The witcher fixed his gaze on Yennefer's eyes. They were cold.

"Please excuse me, Knight of Denesle, my sincere thanks you," he announced, bowing his head. "I also thank all persons present for our hasty rescue. Hanging from the bridge, I heard how all and sundry rushed to our assistance. I beg you all for forgiveness. Except for the noble Yennefer, whom I thank without asking anything in return. Goodbye. This vermin is leaving the company, because this vermin has had enough of you. Take care, Jaskier."

"Hey, Geralt," said Boholt. "Stop acting like a spoiled little girl throwing a tantrum. There's no need to make a mountain out of a molehill. Damn it..."

"Mylooods!"

From out of the gorge ran Kozojed and some of the Holopole militiamen who had been sent out to scout the narrows of the ravine.

"What's happening? What's wrong with him?" asked Nischuka, raising his head.

"My lords... my... dear lords," the shoemaker finally managed, out of breath.

"Stop wheezing, friend," said Gyllenstiern, jamming his thumbs into his gold belt.

"The dragon! Over there, the dragon!"

"Where?"

"On the other side of the ravine... on the flats... lord... It..."

"To the horses!" commanded Gyllenstiern.

"Nischuka!" shouted Boholt, "To the wagon! Ripper, to your horse and follow me!"

"Get to it, boys!" yelled Yarpén Zigrin. "Get to it, damn it!"

"Hey! Wait!" Jaskier had slung his lute over his shoulder. "Geralt, take me on your horse!"

"Jump on!"

The ravine ended with a scattering of pale rocks spread increasingly further apart, creating an irregular circle. Behind them, the ground sloped slightly before becoming uneven and grassy pasture, enclosed all around by limestone cliffs studded with thousands of holes. Three narrow canyons, ancient beds of dried up mountain streams, overlooked the pasture.

Boholt arrived first and, galloping up to the rocky barrier, stopped his horse suddenly and stood up in his stirrups.

"By the plague," he said. "By the yellow plague. This... this... it cannot be!"

"What?" asked Dorregaray, going up to him.

Next to him, Yennefer jumped off the Reavers' wagon, pressed her chest up against a large boulder and looked in turn. She stood back, rubbing her eyes.

"What? What is it?" shouted Jaskier, trying to see over Geralt's shoulder.

"What is it Boholt?"

"The dragon... It's gold."

Not more than one hundred paces from the narrowing of the ravine from which they had just emerged, atop a small hillock on the gently sloping path leading to the main northern canyon, sat a creature. Resting its narrow head on a rounded chest, it stretched its long and slender neck in a perfect arch, its tail wound around its outstretched paws.

There was in this creature an ineffable grace, something feline that clearly contradicted its reptilian provenance, for it was, without a doubt, reptilian. The scales it bore gave the appearance of being finely painted on. Furiously brilliant light shone in the dragon's bright yellow eyes. The creature was most certainly gold: from the tips of its claws planted in the earth up to the end of its long tail that moved slowly amongst the thistles proliferating upon the height. The creature opened its big, amber, bat-like wings and remained still, looking at them with its huge golden eyes and demanding that they admire it.

"A golden dragon," murmured Dorregaray. "It's impossible... a living legend!"

"For crying out loud, golden dragons don't exist," asserted Nischuka, spitting. "I know what I'm talking about."

"What, therefore, do you see upon the height?" asked Jaskier.

"It's trickery."

"An illusion."

"It is not an illusion," said Yennefer.

"It is a golden dragon," added Gyllenstiern. "Most certainly a golden dragon."

"Golden dragons exist only in legends!"

"Stop," Boholt intervened with finality. "There's no need to make a fuss. Any fool can see that we're dealing with a golden dragon. What's the difference, my dear lords? Gold, speckled, chartreuse or checked? It's not big. We can deal with it in less than two. Ripper, Nischuka, take the canvas off the wagon, grab the equipment. Gold, not gold; it matters not."

"There is a difference, Boholt," said Ripper. "And an important one. It's not the dragon we're hunting. It's not the one who was poisoned near Holopole and who waits for us in his cavern, sleeping peacefully on precious metals

and stones. This one is only resting on its arse in the meadow. What's the point of dealing with him?"

"This dragon is gold, Kennet," shouted Yarpén Zigrin. "Have you seen its like before? Don't you understand? We'll get a lot more for its skin than what we could pull in for some pitiful treasure."

"And without damaging the market for precious stones," added Yennefer with an ugly smile. "Yarpén is right. The contract remains in effect. There is still something to share, don't you think?"

"Hey! Boholt?" shouted Nischuka from the wagon, noisily grabbing pieces of equipment. What do we use to protect the horses? Does a gold lizard spit out fire, acid or steam?"

"The devil only knows, my dear lords," replied Boholt, concerned. "Hey! Magicians! Do the legends of golden dragons explain how to slay them?"

"How should we kill it? In the usual way," replied Kozojed suddenly, raising his voice. "There's no time to waste. Give me an animal. We shall stuff it with poison then feed it to the lizard. That'll do it."

Dorregaray gave the shoemaker a filthy look. Boholt spat, Jaskier looked away grimacing with disgust. Yarpén Zigrin smiled unpleasantly, hands on hips.

"What are you waiting for?" Kozojed asked. "It is high time we got down to work. We must establish what the decoy will be composed of so that the reptile passes away immediately; we need something horribly noxious, toxic or rotten."

"Ah!" said the dwarf, still smiling. "What is toxic, filthy and evil-smelling all at once? You mean you don't know, Kozojed? It seems that it's you, you little shit."

"What?"

"Get out of my sight, boot-buggerer, so I don't have to look at you anymore."

"Lord Dorregaray," said Boholt, going up to the magician, "Make yourself useful. Do you remember any legends or tales on the subject? What do you know about golden dragons? "

The magician smiled, standing up again in a dignified fashion.

"What do I know about golden dragons, you ask? Not much, but enough."

"Speak."

"Listen carefully, very carefully: right here in front of us sits a golden dragon. A living legend, perhaps the last and only creature of its type to have survived your murderous folly. Legends should not be killed. I will not allow you to touch this dragon. It that understood? You can put away your equipment and pack up your saddlebags and go home."

Geralt was sure that a fight was going to erupt. He was wrong.

Gyllenstiern broke the silence:

"Honourable magician, be careful what you say and to whom you say it. King Niedamir can order you, Dorregaray, to pack up your saddlebags and go to hell; note that to suggest the same of him is improper. Is that clear?"

"No," the magician replied proudly. "It isn't, because I am and remain Master Dorregaray. I will not obey the orders of an insignificant king governing a kingdom only visible from the top of a hill and in command an abject, filthy, stinking fortress. Did you know, my Lord

Gyllenstiern, that with one wave of my hand I can transform you into cowpat, and your vulgar king into something much worse? Is that clear?"

Gyllenstiern had no time to reply. Boholt approached Dorregaray: he grabbed him by the arm and turned him around. Nischuka and Ripper, silent and grim-faced, stood right behind Boholt.

"Listen well, sir magician," said the huge Reaver quietly. "Listen to me before you wave your hand: I could take the time to tell you, your grace, what I think of your protestations and legends, not to mention your stupid chattering. But I don't feel like it. Content yourself with following answer:"

Boholt cleared his throat, sank a finger into his nostril and snorted onto the magician's shoes.

Dorregaray turned pale, but did not move. He had noticed, as had all the others, the morning star that Nischuka held loosely in his hand. He knew, as did all the others, that the necessary time to cast a spell was undoubtedly longer than that which Nischuka needed to shatter his head into a thousand pieces.

"Okay," said Boholt. "Now kindly step aside, your grace. And if the desire to open your mouth returns, I recommend that you stop up your trap at once with a tuft of grass. Because if I hear your babblings once more, I promise you that you'll regret it." Boholt turned his back on him, rubbing his hands. "Nischuka, Ripper, get to work or the reptile is going to end up eluding us."

"It doesn't seem intent on escape," said Jaskier looking around. "Look at it".

The golden dragon sat on the hillock, yawned, moved its head and wings and struck the earth with its tail.

"King Niedamir and ye knights!" a voice like the sounding of a brass clarion suddenly roared. "I am the dragon Villentretenmerth! I see that the landslide that I created, and was rather proud of, did not deter you. So here you are. As you know, there are only three exits to this valley. To the East towards Holopole and to the West towards Caingorn. You can leave by these two roads, but you will not pass by the ravine located to the north, because I, Villentretenmerth, forbid it. If anybody does not intend to respect my order, I honourably challenge him, in the form of a knight's duel using only conventional weapons; that is, without magic or bursts of flame. Battle will continue until the surrender of one of the parties. I await your answer through your herald, in accordance with protocol!"

All were dumbfounded.

"It talks!" Boholt murmured, barely able to catch his breath. "Incredible!"

"And very intelligently, at that," added Yarpen Zigrin. "Does anybody know what a confessional weapon is?"

"Common place, without magic," answered Yennefer, frowning.

"Something else surprises me, however. They cannot articulate properly with a forked tongue. This rascal uses telepathy. Watch out because it works in both directions. It knows how to read your thoughts."

"Is it completely mad or what?" declared Kennet alias Ripper, annoyed. "A duel of honour? With a stupid reptile? It's so small! Let's go at it all together! As a group!"

"No."

They looked amongst themselves.

Eyck of Denesle, already on his horse, fully equipped, his lance at his stirrup, cut a more impressive figure than when he moved on foot. Fevered eyes shone beneath the raised visor of his helmet. His face was pallid.

"No, Lord Kennet," repeated the knight, "over my dead body. I will not allow insult to the honour of knights in my presence. He who dares to violate the code of honour of duelling..." Eyck spoke more and more intensely; his impassioned voice broke and trembled with excitement. "Who dares to make fun of honour, makes fun of me. His blood or mine will run on this wasted earth. The animal demands a duel? So be it! Let the herald sound my name! Let the Judgment of the Gods decide our fate! The might of fangs and claws for the dragon, his infernal fury, and for me..."

"What a moron," murmured Yarpen Zigrin.

"For me, law, faith and the tears of the virgins that this lizard..."

"Shut up, Eyck, you're giving us the urge to vomit!" Boholt reprimanded.

"Get on with it. Get yourself over to that meadow instead of babbling on!"

"Hey, Boholt! Wait!" the leader of the dwarves intervened, stroking his beard. "You forget the contract? If Eyck strikes down the lizard, he will acquire half..."

"Eyck will acquire nothing at all," replied Boholt, grinning. "I know it. If Jaskier dedicates a song to him, that will be more than enough for him."

"Silence!" Gyllenstiern ordered. "So shall it be. Faith and honour will rally against the dragon in the form of the knight errant, Eyck of Denesle, fighting in the colours of Caingorn as lance and sword of the King Niedamir. Such is the will of the king!"

"You see?" ground out Yarpén Zigrin under his breath. "The lance and the sword of Niedamir. The idiot King of Caingorn has definitely got us. What do we do now?"

"Nothing." Boholt spat. "You are not going to pick a fight with Eyck, alright? Certainly, he talks crap, but since he's already rashly mounted his horse, it's better to let him go. Let him go, damn it, and let him settle his score with this dragon. Afterwards, we shall see."

"Who holds the office of herald?" Jaskier asked. "The dragon wanted a herald. Perhaps me?"

"No. It's not a question of singing some ditty, Jaskier," replied Boholt, frowning. "Yarpén Zigrin has a booming voice; let him be the herald."

"Agreed, what does it matter?" replied Yarpén. "Give me the standard with the coat of arms so that we can do this properly."

"Watch out, lord dwarf, make sure you're polite and respectful." scolded Gyllenstiern.

"Don't tell me what to do." The dwarf thrust out his chest proudly. "I had already conducted my first official engagement while you were still learning how to talk."

The dragon remained sat on the hillock, waving its tail cheerfully while it waited patiently. The dwarf heaved himself onto the highest rock. He cleared his throat and bellowed:

"Hey! You there!" he shouted, putting his hands on his hips. "Scaly shithead! Are you ready to hear what the herald has to say? That's me, in case you were wondering! The knight errant Eyck of Denesle will be the first to take you on, all above board! He will drive his lance into your belly in accordance with sacred custom: which may be unfortunate for you, but it will be joy for the poor virgins and King Niedamir! Battle will have to respect the code of honour and law. You will be forbidden to belch fire. You will only be allowed to make mincemeat out of each other in the conventional way. Battle will go on as long as the opposing party has not given up the ghost or snuffed it... and we wish that for you more than anything! Did you get all that, dragon?"

The dragon yawned, shook its wings and swiftly slid down the hillock onto the flat ground.

"I heard you, virtuous herald," it replied. "The valorous Eyck of Denesle deigns to come to me on meadow. I am ready! "

"What mugs!" Boholt spat, casting a gloomy look towards the knight Eyck as he trotted out to the barrier of rocks. "It's a bloody farce..."

"Shut it, Boholt," shouted Jaskier, rubbing his hands. "Look, Eyck is going to charge! Bloody hell, what a fine ballad I'm going to compose!"

"Hurrah! Three cheers for Eyck!" one of the archers of Niedamir exclaimed.

"I," Kozojed interjected sadly "would have made him gulp down some sulphur, just to be on the safe side."

On the battleground, Eyck returned salute to the dragon by raising his lance. He slammed down the visor of his helmet before driving his spurs into the sides of his mount.

"Well, well," the dwarf responded. "He might be a fool, but he really knows what he's doing. Look at him!"

Leaning forward, straining in the saddle, Eyck lowered his lance when he was at a gallop. In spite of Geralt's assumption, the dragon did not leap back. Neither did it try to elude its adversary by going around him, but launched itself flat out towards the knight who attacked it.

"Kill it! Kill it, Eyck!" shouted Yarpen.

Eyck did not throw himself blindly into a frontal attack. In spite of going full tilt, he skilfully changed direction at the last minute, shifting his lance over his horse's head. Flying alongside the dragon, he struck with all his might, standing up in his stirrups. Everybody started to shout in unison, except Geralt who refused to participate in the chorus.

The dragon evaded the thrust with an elegant circular movement, agile and full of grace. With a whip-like motion, it pivoted and, in a combination of feline exuberance and nonchalance,

disembowelled the horse with its paw. The horse reared high and let out a grunt. The knight, badly shaken, did not drop his lance, however. As the horse collapsed to the ground, the dragon swept Eyck from his saddle with one strike of its mighty paw. He was shot into the air, the plate of his armour grating against itself. Everybody heard the crash and clatter of his fall onto the ground.

The dragon crushed the horse with its foot, sat down and plunged in with its toothy maw. The horse bellowed with terror before dying in a last spasm.

All heard the deep voice of the dragon Villentretenmerth in the silence that had fallen.

"The valorous Eyck of Denesle may be withdrawn from the ground. He is unfit to continue battle. Next, please."

"Oh Shit!" said Yarpen Zigrin in the quiet.

VIII

"Both legs," said Yennefer, drying her hands on a linen cloth. "And undoubtedly part of his backbone. His armour is split in the back as though it's been rammed. His legs were shredded by his own lance. He's not ready to get back up on a horse any time soon, supposing that he gets backup at all."

"Occupational hazard," murmured Geralt.

The sorceress frowned.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"What else do you want to hear, Yennefer?"

"This dragon is incredibly quick, too quick to be struck down by a human."

"I understand. No, Yen. Not me."

"Is it because of your principles?" the sorceress smiled maliciously. "Or perhaps it's just plain, ordinary fear. It would be the only human emotion you're capable of feeling."

"Both," replied the witcher dispassionately. "What difference does it make?"

"Exactly." Yennefer approached him. "None at all. Principles can be overridden; fear can be conquered. Kill this dragon, Geralt. Do it for me."

"For you?"

"For me. I want this dragon. All of it. I want it for myself."

"Use your spells and kill it yourself."

"No. You kill it. With my spells, I shall immobilize the Reavers and the others so that they don't interrupt you."

"There will be deaths, Yennefer."

"Since when does that bother you? You'll be in charge of the dragon. I'll take care of the others."

"Yennefer," the witcher replied coldly. "I'm having trouble understanding. Why do you need this dragon? Does the yellow colour of its scales please you that much? Poverty threatens you not at all; your means are numerous, you are famous. So what is it? Just don't say anything about duty, I beg you."

Yennefer remained silent. Then, frowning, she kicked a pebble lying in the grass.

"There's somebody who can help me. Apparently it... you know what I'm talking about... Apparently it's reversible. There is a chance. I can still have... Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"It is a complicated and costly operation. But in exchange for a golden dragon... Geralt?"

The witcher remained silent.

"When we were hanging from the bridge," she continued, "you asked me for something. I grant it to you, in spite of everything."

The witcher smiled sadly. He touched the star of obsidian which hung on Yennefer's neck with his index finger.

"It's too late, Yen. We're no longer hanging from the bridge. I don't care anymore. In spite of everything."

He expected the worst: a cascade of flames, flashes of lightning, blows raining down on his face, insults and curses. There was nothing. He saw, with astonishment, only the subtle trembling of her lips. Yennefer turned around slowly. Geralt regretted his words. He regretted the emotion from which they had originated. The last possible limit, like the strings of a lute,

had been broken. He glanced at Jaskier and saw that the troubadour quickly turned away to avoid his gaze.

"Questions of honour and chivalry don't seem to apply any more, my dear Lord," announced Boholt, already equipped with the armour of Niedamir, as he sat motionless on a stone with an expression of worry on his face.

"The honour of the knights is lying over there, moaning quietly. It was a very bad idea, Sire Gyllenstiern, to send Eyck into battle as the knight and vassal of your king. I wouldn't dare to point a finger at the culprit, but I definitely know to whom Eyck owes a pair of broken pins. It is true, however, that we've killed two birds with one stone: we've got rid of a madman who wanted to relive the knights' legends by single-handedly defeating a dragon and a smart aleck who intended to get rich quick thanks to first. Do you know who I'm talking about, Gyllenstiern? Yes? Good. Now, it's our turn. This dragon belongs to us. It is to us, the Reavers, that it falls to kill the dragon. But for our own benefit."

"And our contract, Boholt?" the chancellor shot back. "What about our contract?"

"I don't give a shit."

"This is outrageous! It's contempt of court!" Gyllenstiern stamped his foot. "King Niedamir..."

"What about the king?" replied an irate Boholt, leaning on a colossal longsword. "Perhaps the king personally wants to pit his strength against the dragon? Or maybe you, his faithful chancellor? You would need to shield your big fat belly with armour before going into battle! Why not? You're welcome to try. We'll wait, your grace. You had your chance, Gyllenstiern, when Eyck tried to run the dragon through with his lance. You would have taken everything for yourself, and we would have received nothing - not a single scale from its back. Now, it's too late. Open your eyes. Nobody else is likely to fight in the colours of Caingorn. You won't find another fool such as Eyck."

"That's not true!" The shoemaker Kozojed threw himself to the king's feet, who always seemed to be staring at an invisible point on the horizon. "Lord

King! Wait just a little while until our Holopole chaps put in an appearance. It'll be well worth the wait. Damn that lot's stuck up arrogance. Look to the brave men who you can rely on, not to these blowhards!"

"Shut up!" Boholt calmly ordered, brushing a trace of rust from his breastplate. "Shut your mouth, peasant, otherwise I'll shut it for you by making you choke on your teeth."

Kozojed, seeing the approaching Kennet and Nischuka, retreated quickly and blended in with the group of the scouts from Holopole.

"Sire," asked Gyllenstiern. "Sire, what do you order?"

The bored expression immediately disappeared from Niedamir's face. The young monarch scowled, wrinkled his freckled nose and got up.

"What do I order?" he said slowly. "Finally you ask me, Gyllenstiern, instead of deciding for me and in my own name. I'm delighted. Let's keep it like that, Gyllenstiern. From now on, I want you silent and obedient. This, therefore, is the first of my orders. Gather all the people. Order them to place Eyck of Denesle on a wagon. We return to Caingorn."

"Lord..."

"Not a word, Gyllenstiern. Lady Yennefer, noble lords, I take my leave of you. I wasted a fair amount of time carrying out this expedition, but the benefits which I take away from it are incommensurable. I learnt a lot. Thanks to you and your words, Lady Yennefer, Lord Dorregaray, Lord Boholt. And thanks to your silence, Lord Geralt."

"Sire," said Gyllenstiern, "why? The dragon is right there, at your mercy. Sire, what happened to your ambition?"

"My ambition," repeated Niedamir, lost in his thoughts. "I don't have it any more. And if I stay here, I risk losing it forever."

"And Malleore? And the hand of the princess?" The chancellor had not given up; he continued, wringing his hands. "And the throne, Sire? The

people consider that..."

"Screw the people of Malleore, to use the expression of Mr Boholt," replied Niedamir. "The throne of Malleore belongs to me in any case: three hundred cavalry make my reign law in Caingorn and I have one thousand five hundred infantrymen against their measly thousand

shields. They will have to acknowledge my legitimacy. As long as I hang, slay and cleave my way through the roads of Malleore, they will have to acknowledge my legitimacy. As for their princess, that fatted calf, I shall reject her hand. I need only her belly to make me heirs. Afterwards, I shall get rid of her. With the old fashioned method of Master Kozojed. We've spoken enough, Gyllenstiern. It's time to carry out my orders."

"Indeed," murmured Jaskier to Geralt. "He did learn a lot."

"Yes, a lot," confirmed the witcher, looking at the hillock where the golden dragon, lowering its triangular head, licked something that sat in the grass beside it with its scarlet, forked tongue. "But I wouldn't like to be one of his subjects, Jaskier."

"What's going to happen now, do you think?"

The witcher gazed at a tiny green-grey creature that leaned against the golden dragon's paw, flapping its bat-like wings.

"And you, Jaskier, what do you have to say about it?"

"What does it matter what I think? I'm a poet, Geralt. Has my opinion the slightest importance?"

"Certainly."

"In that case, I'll tell you, Geralt. When I see a reptile, a snake for instance, or a lizard, it disgusts me and scares me, they're horrible... While this dragon..."

"Yes?"

"It's... it's beautiful, Geralt."

"Thank you, Jaskier."

"What for?"

Geralt turned around and, with a slow movement, tightened the buckle on the bandolier across his chest by two holes. He raised his right hand to check that the hilt of his sword was well positioned. The poet looked at him wide-eyed.

"Geralt, you're going to..."

"Yes," replied the witcher, calmly. "There is a limit as to what is possible. I've had enough of all this. What are you going to do, Jaskier? Will you stay or will you follow Niedamir's troops?"

The troubadour bent to carefully put his lute down against a stone, then straightened up.

"I'll stay. What are you talking about? Limits of the possible? I reserve the right to use this expression as the title of my ballad."

"It might be your last ballad."

"Geralt."

"Yes?"

"Don't kill it... if you can."

"A sword is a sword, Jaskier. When it's drawn..."

"Try."

"I shall try."

Dorregaray sneered, turning towards Yennefer and the Reavers he pointed to the royal standard as it moved away.

"There," he said, "goes King Niedamir. He no longer gives orders by the mouth of Gyllenstiern as he has finally gained some common sense. It's a good thing that you're with us, Jaskier. I propose that you begin composing your ballad."

"About what?"

The magician produced his wand from inside his sable coat.

"How Master Dorregaray, wizard by trade, succeeded in driving away a bunch of brigands eager to exterminate the last living golden dragon. Don't move Boholt! Yarpén, take your hand away from your axe! Yennefer, don't even think about moving a finger! Go, you wretched curs, I suggest that you follow the king like a pack of hounds traipsing after their master. Take your horses and your wagons. I warn you: the slightest wrong movement, and there will remain of the perpetrator only a smell of burning and an empty space on the sand. I'm not joking."

"Dorregaray," Yennefer hissed.

"Dear magician," said Boholt in a reasonable voice. "Either we come to an agreement..."

"Be silent, Boholt. I repeat: do not touch this dragon. Take your business elsewhere and good riddance."

Yennefer's hand suddenly shot forward and the ground around Dorregaray exploded in a flash of azure fire, whirling about in cloud of gravel and ripped up clods. The magician staggered, surrounded by flames. Nischuka took advantage of this to leap up and punch him in the face. Dorregaray fell to the ground, his wand firing off a flash of red lightning that struck harmlessly amongst the rocks. Ripper, suddenly appearing at his side, kicked the unfortunate magician. He had already pivoted to repeat this gesture when the witcher fell between them. He pushed Ripper back, drawing his sword and striking horizontally at the space between his pauldron and cuirass. Boholt blocked the blow with his longsword. Jaskier tried to trip up Nischuka, but to no avail: Nischuka took hold of the bard's rainbow tunic and punched him between eyes. Yarpén Zigrin, springing up

behind Jaskier, buckled his legs by hitting him in the back of his knees with the handle of his axe.

Geralt dodged Boholt's sword with a pirouette and struck Ripper at close quarters as he tried to evade him, tearing his iron armband from his arm. Ripper retreated backwards with a jump, tripped over and fell to the ground. Boholt grunted, wielding his sword like a scythe. Geralt jumped over the hissing blade and rammed Boholt's cuirass with the hilt of his sword,

pulled back then aimed for Boholt's cheek. Boholt, seeing that he could not parry blow, threw himself backwards and fell onto his back. In one leap, the witcher had already joined him... At this instant, Geralt felt the earth give way and his feet falter. The horizon became vertical. Trying in vain to draw the Sign of Protection with his hand, he fell heavily onto his side, letting his sword slip free from his paralysed hand. He heard his pulse knocking in his ears and a continuous hiss.

"Bind them while the spell still lasts," shouted Yennefer, from further away upon the height. "All three!"

Dorregaray and Geralt, stunned and powerless, allowed themselves to be bound and tied to the wagon wordlessly and without resistance. Jaskier cursed and put up a fight and as a result was trussed up after first having received a few blows.

"What's the point in taking these sons of bitches prisoner?" Kozojed interrupted, approaching the group. "It's better to kill these traitors right away and be done with it."

"You're a son of the same bitch," Yarpen Zigrin replied. "Though saying that's an insult to dogs. Get lost, parasite!"

"Such recklessness!" shouted Kozojed. "We shall certainly see if you'll be as arrogant when my men arrive from Holopole. In their opinion, you..."

Yarpen, with an uncommon agility for his stature, effortlessly pivoted and struck him in the head with the handle of his axe. Nischuka, coming

alongside, finished the job with a kick which sent Kozojed to graze on the grass some distance away.

"You'll regret this!" shouted the shoemaker, on all fours. "All of you..."

"Get him, lads!" roared Yarpén Zigrin. "That filthy-faced son of a whore cobbler! Come on, Nischuka!"

Kozojed didn't hang about. He jumped up and took off at a run towards the eastern canyon.

The Reavers of Holopole chased after him. The dwarves threw stones at him, laughing.

"Already the air's got a lot fresher," laughed Yarpén. "Okay, Boholt, let's go and get the dragon!"

"Wait a minute." Yennefer raised her arm. "The only thing you're going to be hitting is the road...You can go back that way: now be off with you. Every single one of you."

"What?" Boholt flinched, his eyes flashed malevolently. "What are you talking about, dear lady sorceress?"

"Get out! Be gone! Go and find the shoemaker," repeated Yennefer. "Every last one of you. I'm going to take on the dragon myself. With non-conventional weapons. Thank me before leaving. Without me, you would have had a taste of the witcher's sword. Go quickly, Boholt, before I get annoyed. I'm warning you: I know a spell which could transform you into geldings. I have only to wave my hand."

"Good grief," exclaimed Boholt. "My patience has reached its limit. I won't be made to look a fool. Ripper, remove the wagon's tongue. It seems to me that I also need a non-conventional

weapon. Somebody's going to suffer, my dear lords. I'm not pointing a finger. I shall simply say that it's a certain despicable sorceress."

"Try it, Boholt. It would make my day."

"Yennefer," asked the dwarf, reproachfully, "Why?"

"Perhaps it's because I don't like to share, Yarpn."

"Oh well," the dwarf smiled, "you're only human. So human that it's even worthy of a dwarf. It's nice to find one's own qualities in a sorceress. I don't like to share either, Yennefer."

He bent over in a movement as short and quick as a flash of lightning. A metal ball, produced from who knows where, flew through the air and struck Yennefer's forehead violently. Before the sorceress came to, Ripper and Nischuka immobilized her arms and Yarpn has bound her ankles with a rope. The sorceress howled with anger. One of Yarpn's boys, holding her from behind, threw a bridle over her head and pulled it tight, stifling her shouts by shoving the straps into her open mouth.

"What now, Yennefer?" shot Boholt, walking towards her. "How are you going to transform me into a gelding without being able to move your hands?"

He tore the neck of her tunic then ripped her shirt open. Trapped in the bridles, Yennefer hurled abuse at him in the form of stifled shouting.

"We have no time at present," said Boholt, groping her while ignoring the sniggering of the dwarves, "but wait just a little while, sorceress. When we've taken care of the dragon, we'll be able to have some fun. Tie her firmly to the wheel, lads. Both hands tied, so that she can't move a finger. And none of you boys dare to interfere with her, damn it. He who stands strongest against the dragon will have first place in the queue."

"Boholt," said Geralt quietly and ominously. "Watch out. I will hunt you to the ends of the earth."

"You surprise me," replied the Reaver, also quietly. "If I were you, I'd keep my mouth shut because, knowing your abilities, I'm likely take your threat seriously. You leave me no choice. I can't let you live, witcher. But we'll deal with you later. Nischuka, Ripper, to the horses."

"That's just your luck," Jaskier wailed. "Damn it, it's me who got you into this mess."

Dorregaray lowered his head and watched thick drops of his blood run slowly from his nose onto his belly.

"Stop staring at me this instant!" the sorceress shouted at Geralt. She writhed like a snake in her bonds in a vain attempt to conceal her naked charms. Geralt obediently diverted his eyes. Jaskier didn't.

"According to what I see," mocked the bard, "you must have used a whole barrel of mandrake elixir, Yennefer. Your skin resembles that of a sixteen-year-old girl. It's giving me goosebumps."

"Shut up, you son of a whore!" the sorceress replied.

Jaskier didn't relent, "How old are you really? Two hundred years? Rather a hundred and fifty, say. And you act like..."

Yennefer stretched her neck to spit at him. It missed its target...

"Yen," muttered the witcher sadly, wiping his saliva spattered ear with his shoulder.

"Make him stop ogling me!"

"I have no intention of doing so," declared Jaskier, continuing to admire the pleasant view of the half-naked sorceress. "It's because of her that we're prisoners. They'll cut our throats. At the very least, they're going to rape her. At her age..."

"Shut up, Jaskier," ordered the witcher.

"Not on your life. I have a burning desire to compose a ballad about a pair of tits. Please don't interrupt me."

"Jaskier," Dorregaray spat out some blood, "be serious."

"I'm very serious, damn it."

Boholt, helped up by a dwarf, clambered onto his saddle with difficulty due to the heavy leather armour he was decked out in. Nischuka and Ripper were already waiting on their mounts, huge longswords at their sides.

"Good," muttered Boholt. "Now to the dragon."

"No," a deep voice answered, the sonority of which was reminiscent of a brass horn. "It is I who will come to you!"

A long bright gold muzzle appeared behind the circle of rocks, followed by an elongated neck protected by a row of spines then long-clawed paws. Menacing reptilian eyes with vertical pupils observed the scene from on high.

"I couldn't wait on the battleground any longer," explained the dragon Villentretenmerth, looking around at them. "I therefore took the liberty of coming to join you. I see that the adversaries eager to fight me are growing fewer and fewer."

Boholt grabbed his reins between his teeth and his sword in his two fists.

"Thatsh gahd," he mumbled indistinctly, biting on the reins. "Ah hahp dat yer're reddey fer combat, monshter!"

"I am ready," replied the dragon, bowing its back into an arch and wafting its tail in the air as a sign of provocation.

Boholt checked what was going on around him. Nischuka and Ripper surrounded the animal slowly, with deliberate calmness, on either side. Yarpén Zigrin and the boys waited behind them, armed with axes.

"Aaargh!" bellowed Boholt, spurring his horse on wildly and brandishing his sword.

The dragon pivoted, rising up and letting itself fall back to the earth; like a scorpion with its tail above its haunches, it struck downward, mowing down not Boholt, but Nischuka who attacked laterally. Nischuka fell with a crash, his horse neighing and screaming. Boholt, approaching at a gallop, attacked

with a mighty blow from his sword, the broad blade of which the dragon skilfully avoided. The momentum of the gallop took Boholt on past the dragon. It twisted and, standing on its hind legs, hit Ripper with its claws, disembowelling the horse and goring its rider's thigh with a single swipe. Boholt, leaning in the saddle, managed to gain control of his mount and, still gripping the reins between his teeth, charged again.

Whipping the air with its tail, the dragon swept aside all of the dwarves as they came running up to it. Then it launched itself at Boholt, vigorously crushing Ripper in its passage as he tried to get up again. Boholt, turning his head, tried an evasive manoeuvre but the dragon was much quicker and more agile. Shrewdly intercepting Boholt from the left, cutting off his route, it hit him with its clawed foot. The horse reared and fell onto its side. Boholt flew from the saddle, losing both sword and helmet, and fell backwards before bashing his head on a boulder.

"Run, boys! Into the mountains!" yelled Yarpen Zigrin with a shout which drowned out the howling Nischuka, still crushed by his horse.

Beards blowing in the wind, the dwarves ran towards the rocks at an amazing speed for their short legs. The dragon did not pursue them. He sat quietly and looked around. Nischuka thrashed and yelled under the weight of his horse. Boholt was lying motionless. Ripper limped back to the shelter of the rocks, walking sideways like a crab.

"It's incredible," murmured Dorregaray. "Incredible..."

"Hey!" Jaskier pulled so hard on his bonds, the wagon shook. "What's that? There! Look!"

They saw a big cloud of dust on the side of the eastern ravine, soon followed by a tumult of shouting, rattle and clatter. The dragon raised its head to look.

Three big wagons carrying armed men came out onto the plain. They scattered to encircle the dragon.

"Bloody hell! It's the militia and guilds of Holopole! " cried Jaskier. "They succeeded in bypassing the river Braa! Yes, it's them! Look, there's Kozojed at the head!"

The dragon lowered its head to gently push the small, greyish, chirping creature towards the wagon. It then struck the ground with its tail, roaring loudly, before launching itself like a speeding arrow to meet the inhabitants of Holopole.

"What's that small thing moving in the grass over there, Geralt?" Yennefer asked.

"It's what the dragon protected," replied the witcher. "It was just recently hatched in a cavern in the northern ravine. It's the offspring of the female dragon poisoned by Kozojed."

The baby reptile, stumbling and hugging the ground with its rounded belly, came up to the wagon with a halting step. It chirped, stood on its hind legs and unfurled its wings. It suddenly went to snuggle up against the sorceress. Yennefer sighed deeply, looking puzzled.

"He likes you," murmured Geralt.

"He may be young, but he's no idiot," added Jaskier, fidgeting enthusiastically in spite of his bonds. "Look where he lays his little head. I'd like to be in his place, damn it. Hey! Little one! You should run away. This is Yennefer, the bane of dragons! And witchers! At least of one witcher in particular..."

"Shut up, Jaskier," shouted Dorregaray. "Look at what's happening on the ground over there! They're going to catch it! Plague upon on all of them!"

The wagons of the inhabitants of Holopole, rumbling like chariots, rushed at the attacking dragon.

"Hack it to pieces," shouted Kozojed hanging on the driver's shoulders. "Hack it to pieces until it's dead, my friends! Don't hold back!"

In a single leap, the dragon evaded the first wagon, but found itself trapped between the two following, from whence a big double fisherman's net, tied with ropes, was thrown over him. The entangled dragon fell, struggling, then curled into a ball before lashing out its legs. The net ripped sharply, torn to pieces. The first wagon, which had now managed to turn around, threw another net, immobilizing it completely. The other two wagons made a u-turn and charged the dragon once again, rattling and bouncing over the potholes in the ground.

"You are caught in the net, carp!" yelled Kozojed. "We're not going to delay gutting you!"

The dragon roared, fire billowing out into the sky with clouds of smoke. The Holopole militiamen jumped down from their wagons and rushed towards it. The dragon roared once again, a desperate, resounding call.

An answer came up from the northern canyon in the form of a piercing war cry.

At a full on gallop, their blonde braids flitting in the wind and blades flashing, there suddenly appeared from the ravine...

"The Zerricanians!" cried the witcher, struggling to free himself from his bonds.

"Oh, shit!" exclaimed Jaskier. "Geralt, do you know what this means?"

The Zerricanians cut through the mass of militiamen like a hot knife in through butter, leaving in their wake heaps of slashed bodies. They dismounted from their horses before running flat out towards the imprisoned dragon. A militiaman tried to intervene. His head rolled from his shoulders. Another one tried to stab Vea with a pitchfork, but the Zerricanian, holding her sword with both hands, disembowelled him from his perineum up to his sternum. The others took to their heels.

"To the wagons," shouted Kozojed. "To the wagons, my friends! We shall crush them with the wagons."

"Geralt!" Yennefer shouted suddenly. Stretching her trussed up legs, she managed to move them under the wagon, very close to the witcher's hands which were tied behind his back. "The Sign of Igni! Burn my bonds! Can you feel the rope? Burn it, damn it!"

"Without looking?" Geralt protested. "I'll burn you, Yen!"

"Form the sign! I can take it!"

Geralt obeyed. He felt a tingling in his fingers, forming the Sign of Igni just above the sorceress' ankles. Yennefer turned her head to bite the neck of her tunic, stifling a moan. The young dragon nestled his wings against her, chirping.

"Yen!"

"Burn the rope!" she wailed.

The bonds finally gave way as the foul smell of charred meat became intolerable. Dorregaray issued a strange sound before fainting, sagging in his bonds against the wheel of the wagon.

The sorceress, face twisted with pain, sat back and extended a freed leg. She cried out in a voice full of rage and suffering. The medallion Geralt wore at his neck trembled as though it were alive. Yennefer shifted her hips and gestured with her leg towards the wagons of the Holopole militia and called out a spell. The air vibrated and filled with the smell of ozone.

"Oh! By the Gods!" Jaskier moaned with awe. "What a ballad it will be, Yennefer!"

The spell cast by her pretty leg did not quite succeed. The first wagon and everyone inside it took on a shade of buttercup yellow which the warriors Holopole, blinded by the heat of battle, did not even notice. The spell was more effective on the second wagon: all its crew were instantly transformed into huge pimply frogs which fled, croaking comically, in all directions. The wagon, deprived of a driver, turned over and smashed onto the ground.

Dragging the torn off tongue behind them, the horses disappeared into the distance, neighing hysterically.

Yennefer bit her lip, raising her leg once more. The buttercup yellow wagon, accompanied by a rousing music coming from somewhere above, was reduced to a cloud of smoke of the same colour; all of the crew, dazed, crashed to the grass, forming a picturesque heap.

The wheels of the third wagon became square: the horses reared up, the wagon collapsed in on itself and the Holopole militiamen were ejected. Out of pure spite, Yennefer moved her leg again, and with an additional charm, transformed all of them at random into turtles, geese, millipedes, pink flamingos or suckling pigs. The Zerricanians expertly and methodically dispatched the others.

The dragon, finally tearing the net to pieces, jumped up, flapping its wings. It roared and flew like an arrow in pursuit of Kozojed, who had succeeded in escaping the massacre. The shoemaker ran like a gazelle, but the dragon was faster. Geralt, seeing its open maw and flashing teeth as sharp as daggers, turned away. He heard a bloodcurdling scream then a terrible crunch. Jaskier stifled a cry. Yennefer, pale as a sheet, doubled over and turned around to vomit under the wagon.

The silence which followed was broken only by the croaking, squawking and shrieking of the survivors of the Holopole militia.

Vea stood over Yennefer, legs wide apart, wearing a nasty smile. The Zerricanian drew her sword. Yennefer, pale, raised her leg.

"No," interrupted Borch, alias Three Jackdaws, sat on a stone. He held in his arms the young dragon, calm and happy.

"We will not kill Lady Yennefer," the dragon Villentretenmerth continued. "There's no point now. Besides, we are now grateful to Lady Yennefer for her invaluable help. Release them, Vea."

"Did you know, Geralt?" Jaskier murmured, rubbing his numb hands. "Did you know? There's an ancient ballad about a golden dragon. Golden

dragons can..."

"can take all forms," completed the witcher, "even human form. I've also heard about it, but I didn't believe it."

"Mr. Yarpén Zigrin!" the dragon called out to the dwarf hanging on the vertical cliff wall, about two hundred cubits above the ground. "What are you looking for up there? Marmots? They are not to your taste, if I remember rightly. Get down, I beg you, and busy yourself with the Reavers. They need assistance. Killing is over for today. It's better for everybody."

Jaskier tried to wake the still unconscious Dorregaray, casting anxious glances at the Zerricanians who continued to survey the battlefield attentively. Geralt salved and dressed Yennefer's burnt ankles. The sorceress hissed in pain and muttered curses under her breath.

Having finished with this task, Geralt got up.

"Stay here," he said, "I need to talk to the dragon."

Yennefer, wincing, rose.

"I'll go with you, Geralt." She took him by the hand. "Can I? Please, Geralt."

"With me, Yen? I thought that..."

"Don't think."

She clung to his shoulder.

"Yen?"

"Everything is okay now, Geralt."

He looked into her eyes, which were now as warm as they once were in the past. He bent and kissed her on the lips. They were hot, soft and yearning. As they once were in the past.

They approached the dragon. Yennefer, supported by Geralt, made a very low courtesy as if she were before a king, holding the hemline of her dress with the tips of her fingers.

"Three Jack-... Villentretenmerth...," stated the witcher.

"My name means literally in your language ' three black birds ', " explained Borch.

The young dragon clutched Three Jackdaws' forearm with its claws and stretched out his neck to receive a caress.

"Order and Chaos," said Villentretenmerth, smiling. "Remember, Geralt? Chaos represents aggression, while order represents the means to protect itself from it. Shouldn't we go to the ends of the earth to stand against aggression and evil, Geralt? Especially when, as you said, the wage is attractive. As it was in this case. It was the treasure of the female dragon

Myrgatabrakke, poisoned near Holopole. It was she who called me so that I could help her to neutralize the evil that threatened her. Myrgatabrakke flew off shortly after Eyck de Denesle had been removed from the field of battle. She had time to escape during your debates and quarrels, leaving me her treasure, in other words, my wage."

The young dragon chirped and flapped its wings. "Therefore, you..."

"Yes," interrupted the dragon. "It's necessary in this day and age. The creatures that you commonly call monsters have felt, for some time, more and more threatened by humans. They don't know how to defend themselves and they need a protector... a witcher."

"And the goal at the end of the path?"

"Here it is." Villentretenmerth raised his forearm; frightened, the young dragon started to chirp. "Here is my goal, my purpose. Thanks to him, I shall prove, Geralt of Rivia, that there is no limit as to what's possible. You too, one day, will discover such a purpose, witcher. Even those who are different deserve to live. Goodbye, Geralt. Goodbye, Yennefer."

The sorceress courtesied once again, steadying herself firmly on Geralt's shoulder. Villentretenmerth stood up and looked at her, his face very serious.

"Excuse my boldness and my frankness, Yennefer. It's written on your faces, I don't even need to read your thoughts. You were made for each other, you and the witcher. But nothing will come of it. Nothing. I'm sorry."

"I know." Yennefer turned a little pale. "I know, Villentretenmerth. But I too would like to believe that there is no limit as to what's possible or at least that this limit is very distant."

Vea went up to Geralt. She whispered to him, touching his shoulder. The dragon laughed.

"Geralt, Vea wants you to know that she will never forget the tub at the Pensive Dragon. She hopes that she will see you again."

"What?" Yennefer asked, blinking anxiously.

"Nothing," the witcher replied quickly. "Villentretenmerth..."

"I'm listening, Geralt of Rivia."

"You can take all forms. Whatever you wish?"

"Yes."

"Why transform into a human? Why Borch, with the coat of arms of three black birds?"

The dragon gave him a broad smile.

"It's hard for me to say, Geralt, in what circumstances our respective forefathers had their first meeting, but I know that for dragons nothing is more loathsome than man. Man awakens in dragons an instinctive and irrational hatred. I am an exception. To me... you are quite likeable. Goodbye."

It was not a gradual transformation, like the hazy disappearance of an illusion. It took place in the blink of an eye. In place of where there was, a moment earlier, a curly-haired knight in a tunic adorned with three black birds there now appeared a golden dragon, stretching his long slender neck gracefully. Bowing his head, the dragon unfurled wings that shone brilliant gold in the rays of the sun. Yennefer sighed loudly.

Vea, already in the saddle next to Tea, waved goodbye.

"Vea," said the witcher, "you were right."

"Hmm?"

"He is definitely the most beautiful."

A Shard of Ice

i

The dead sheep, swollen and bloated, its four rigid legs raised towards the sky, gave a convulsion. Geralt, sitting on his haunches against the wall, drew his sword slowly, taking care that the blade did not make a sound as it left the sheath. Ten paces away from him, the pile of refuse suddenly swelled and heaved. The witcher had just enough time to leap up and avoid the wave of refuse that had been set in motion and now poured forth violently.

A tentacle with a blunt, tapering end suddenly emerged from the refuse and shot forward to meet him with incredible speed. The witcher jumped onto the remnants of a broken cabinet that lay on top of a pile of rotting vegetables; he regained his balance and struck the tentacle with his sword, quickly and cleanly, severing the suckers with the staggering blow. He immediately leapt backwards, but slipped on the boards, landing thigh-deep in the rotting mass.

The mountain of trash exploded like a geyser, expelling a dense and foul-smelling sludge of kitchen waste, rotting rags and whitish strands of sauerkraut; from beneath there appeared a huge and bulbous body,

shapeless like a grotesque potato, lashing the air with its three tentacles and its mutilated stump.

Geralt, still stuck in the sludge, twisted his hips, smoothly severed another tentacle with a broad stroke. The remaining two tentacles, as thick as boughs, fell heavily onto him, driving him deeper into the refuse. The monster's body barrelled towards him, ploughing through the refuse. Geralt saw the hideous bulb split open, revealing a gaping maw full of enormous, jagged teeth.

He let the tentacles grab him around the waist and was pulled out of the mess with a squelching noise. He was drawn towards the beast as it advanced through the refuse, reeling itself nearer; its serrated jaws gnashed wildly and furiously. When he got close to the strange mouth, the witcher struck at the beast, wielding his sword with both hands, the blade sliding slowly and casually into its flesh. It emitted a choking, sickly sweet stench. The monster started to hiss and tremble; it released its prey, tentacles waving in the air convulsively. Once again mired in the filth, Geralt struck again, body twisting, so that the blade crunched and ground hideously against the monster's snarled teeth. The creature gurgled and collapsed, but then suddenly surged upwards, hissing and splashing the witcher with stinking slime. Desperately wading through the sludge, Geralt dragged himself forward, pushing the refuse aside with his torso before launching himself outwards. He then struck with all his might, blade cleaving downwards between the monster's two faintly phosphorescent eyes, slicing its body from top to bottom. The monster groaned with pain; it shuddered, spilling forth a pile of waste like a punctured bladder and emitting warm waves of palpable stench. The tentacles twitched and trembled amongst the decay.

The witcher scrambled out of the thick sludge, finding himself standing on a swaying but solid footing. He felt something sticky and repulsive that had seeped into his boot creep further up his calf. To the well, he thought, so I can clean this filth off as quickly as possible. Wash myself clean. The monster's tentacles slapped loudly and wetly on the refuse once more, then fell still.

A shooting star flashed across the sky, for one second enlivening the black firmament studded with unmoving bright points. The witcher didn't make a wish.

He breathed heavily, harshly, feeling the effects of the elixirs he had drunk before the battle subsiding. Adjacent to the city walls, the huge heap of refuse and debris sloping steeply down toward the glittering ribbon of the river now looked exotic and picturesque in the light of the stars. The witcher spat.

The monster was dead. It had now become part of the pile in which it had lived.

A second shooting star passed.

"Trash," the witcher uttered with difficulty, "Nothing but muck, filth and shit."

II

"You stink, Geralt," Yennefer frowned, not turning from the mirror before which she removed the make-up from her eyelids and lashes. "Take a bath".

"There's no water," he said, peering into the tub.

"We'll sort something out." The sorceress stood up and opened wide the window. "Would you prefer seawater or fresh water?"

"Sea, for a change."

Yennefer quickly threw open her arms, then cast a spell by performing a swift, intricate gesture with her fingers. A strong wind blew through the open window, cool and damp. The shutters rattled as an irregular green sphere burst, whistling, into the room, disturbing the dust. The tub foamed with water, heaving restlessly, beating against the edges and splashing out onto the floor. The sorceress returned to her original task.

"Did it go well?" she asked. "What was it?"

"A zeugl, as I thought." Geralt pulled off his boots, threw off his clothes and plunged a foot into the tub. "Damn, Yen, it's cold. Can't you heat it up?"

"No." The sorceress said. Bringing her face nearer to the mirror, she placed a few drops of something in her eye with a pipette. "That type of spell is terribly exhausting and makes me feel sick. Anyway, after the elixirs, the cold water will do you good."

Geralt did not argue. Arguing with Yennefer was pointless.

"Did the zeugl cause you difficulty?"

The sorceress plunged the pipette into the bottle and moistened her other eye, grimacing comically.

"Not especially."

They heard a loud noise on the other side of the opened window, the sharp crack of breaking wood and a slurred falsetto voice, brazenly reciting the chorus of a popular bawdy song.

"A zeugl." The sorceress grabbed a second bottle from amongst the imposing battery of containers that stood on the table and drew out the cork. The smell of lilac and gooseberries filled room. "You see, even in the city it's easy for a witcher to find work. You don't have to roam the wilds. Istredd maintains that after the extinction of a forest or marsh creature, another one always replaces it; a new mutation adapted to the artificial environment created by humans."

As usual, Geralt frowned when Yennefer mentioned Istredd. The witcher was starting to get fed up with her going on about the genius of Istredd. Even when Istredd was right.

"Istredd is right," continued Yennefer massaging her cheeks and eyelids with the potion that smelt of lilac and gooseberries. "You've seen it yourself: pseudo-rats in sewers and cellars, zeugls in the refuse, platocorises in filthy ditches and drains, giant molluscs rampant in the mill ponds. It's almost symbiotic, don't you think?"

And ghouls in the graveyards devouring the dead a day after the funeral, he thought, rinsing the soap from his body. Utterly symbiotic.

"Yes..." The sorceress pushed back the bottles and jars. "Even in city, there's work for a witcher. I think you'll eventually settle down permanently in some market town, Geralt."

The devil take me first! he thought, but kept it to himself. To contradict Yennefer would have inevitably led to a quarrel and quarrelling with Yennefer could be dangerous.

"Have you finished, Geralt?"

"Yes."

"Get out of the tub."

Without getting up, Yennefer casually waved her hand and cast a spell. The water from the tub, along with that which spilled onto the floor and dripped from Geralt came together in a translucent sphere, then flew, whistling, out of the window. There was a loud splash.

"A plague upon you, you son of a whore!" came an angry shout from below. "Don't you know where to chuck out your piss? May you be eaten alive by lice! Until you are dead!"

The sorceress closed the window.

"Damn, Yen," the witcher chuckled. "Couldn't you throw the water away somewhere else?"

"I could have," she muttered, "but I didn't feel like it."

She took a lantern from the table and approached the witcher. Her white nightgown, clinging to every slight movement of her body, cut an incredibly enchanting vision. More so than if she were naked, he thought.

"I want to examine you," she said. "The zeugl could have wounded you."

"It didn't wound me. I would've felt it."

"After the elixirs? Don't make me laugh. You wouldn't have felt a fracture unless the bone was poking out and catching on things. And the zeugl could have given you anything including tetanus and blood poisoning. You have to be checked. Turn around."

He felt the warmth of the lantern on his body, and the occasional caress of her hair.

"You seem to be alright," she said. "Lie down before the potions knock you down. Those potions are terribly dangerous. They'll eventually kill you."

"I have to take them before a fight."

Yennefer did not respond. She sat before the mirror once again, combing her long, black, shiny curls. She always combed her hair before going to bed. Geralt thought it strange, but he loved to watch her do it. He suspected that Yennefer knew this.

He suddenly felt very cold, the elixirs making him shiver violently. His neck grew stiff and the effects finally settled in the pit of his stomach in swirling eddies of nausea. He swore under his breath and collapsed on the bed, his gaze still on Yennefer.

A movement in the corner of the room caught his eye and he looked closer. Nailed crookedly to the wall were some deer antlers, covered in cobwebs, atop which perched a small black bird.

Turning its head sideways, the bird fixed the witcher with a yellow, unmoving stare.

"What's that, Yen? Where did it come from?"

"What?" Yennefer turned around. "Oh, that! It's a kestrel."

"A kestrel? Kestrels are speckled russet. That one's black."

"It's a magical kestrel. I made it myself."

"Why?"

"I need it for something," she replied coldly.

Geralt didn't ask any more questions, knowing that Yennefer would not answer them.

"Are you going to see Istredd tomorrow?"

The sorceress pushed back the bottles on the table, placed her comb in a small casket and closed the leaves of the triptych mirror.

"Yes, I'm going in the morning. Why?"

"Nothing."

She lay next to him without putting out the lantern. She was unable to sleep in the dark, so she never put out the light. Whether the lamp was a night light or candle, it always had to burn to the last. Always. Another eccentricity. Yennefer had an incredible amount of eccentricities.

"Yen?"

"Yes?"

"When are we going back on the road?"

"Stop going on about it." Yennefer pulled on the eiderdown roughly. "We've been here three days and you've already asked this question about thirty times. I told you: I have business here in the city."

"With Istredd?"

"Yes."

He sighed and embraced her without concealing his intentions.

"Hey!" she whispered. "You took the elixirs..."

"So what?"

"Nothing." she giggled like a teenager.

She nestled against him then wriggled around so that she could remove her nightgown more easily. Delighting in her nakedness, as usual Geralt felt a shiver go down his spine and a tingling in his fingers as they came into contact with Yennefer's bare skin. His lips lightly touched her breasts, rounded and delicate with nipples so pale they were only apparent by their prominence. His hands got lost in the tangle of her hair, sweet with the fragrance of lilac and gooseberries.

Yennefer gave herself up to his caresses, purring like a cat, wrapping her legs around his hips.

The witcher soon realised that he had, as usual, overestimated his resistance to the elixirs and had forgotten their negative effects on the body.

Maybe it's not the elixirs, he thought. Maybe it's down to battle fatigue and the ever present risk of death. It's a fatigue that's so routine, I often forget about it. My body, even though it's

enhanced, can't fight that routine. It reacts in the usual way, but the only trouble is that it happens when you don't want it to. Damn it...

As usual, Yennefer didn't allow herself to lose heart over such a trifle. He felt her touch and heard her soft murmur in his ear. As usual, he thought of

the countless number of times she'd needed to use this very practical spell. And then he thought of it no more.

As usual, it was extraordinary.

He gazed at her mouth, the corners quivering in an involuntary smile. He knew this smile well; more a smile of triumph than happiness. He never asked her about it. He knew that she wouldn't have answered him.

The black kestrel, perched on the deer's antlers, flapped its wings and snapped its crooked beak. Yennefer turned her head and sighed with great sadness.

"Yen?"

"Nothing, Geralt." She kissed him. "It's Nothing."

The lantern shone with a flickering light. In the wall, a mouse scratched and a beetle rustled quietly and rhythmically in the chest of drawers.

"Yen?"

"Hmm?"

"Let's get away from here. I have a bad feeling about this place. This city has a malignant effect on me."

The sorceress turned on her side and caressed his cheek, pushing away strands of hair. Her fingers slid lower, touching the calloused scar that ran across his neck.

"Do you know what the name of this city means? Aedd Gynael?"

"No. Is it the language of the elves?"

"Yes. It means 'Shard of Ice'."

"That's strange, it doesn't suit this disgusting hell-hole."

"Amongst the elves," she whispered thoughtfully, "there is the legend of the Queen of Winter, travelling across the country through a blizzard on a sleigh drawn by white horses. She sows hard, sharp, tiny shards of ice as she goes and woe betide he should one of these shards pierce his eye or his heart. That someone is lost forever. Nothing will be able to cheer him, all that is not the pure white of snow will become for him ugly, hateful, disgusting. He will not know peace and, forsaking all, will follow the Queen in pursuit of his dream and his love. Of course, he will never find it and will die of sorrow. Apparently in this city, in ancient times, such a thing happened. It's a beautiful legend, isn't it?"

"The elves know how to dress everything up with pretty words," mumbled Geralt sleepily, tracing her shoulder with his lips. "It's not a legend, Yen. It's a beautiful way to describe the terrible phenomenon called the Wild Hunt, a curse apparent in certain lands. An irrational collective insanity drives people to follow the ghostly procession racing across the sky. I've seen it. Indeed, it's not uncommon in winter. I've been offered a lot of money to end the curse, but I didn't take it. Nothing can stand against the Wild Hunt..."

"Witcher," Yennefer murmured, kissing his cheek, "you possess not one ounce of romanticism. I... I love the legends of the elves; they're so beautiful. It's a pity that humans don't have such legends. Maybe one day they'll create some? But what will their legends be like? All around, everywhere you look, is dullness and uncertainty. Even something born of beauty soon leads to boredom and banality, commonplace, the human ritual, the tedious rhythm of life. Oh, Geralt, it's not easy being a sorceress, but in comparison with ordinary human existence... Geralt?"

She laid her head on his chest, feeling his slow, rhythmic breathing.

"Sleep," she whispered, "Sleep, witcher."

III

The city had a malignant effect on him.

From the moment he awoke, everything put him in a bad mood and roused his anger. Everything. He was annoyed that much of the morning had been

wasted because he had overslept and annoyed at the absence of Yennefer who had left before he woke up.

She must have hurried, because her accoutrements, which were usually neatly put away in the caskets, had been left scattered across the table like dice thrown by a fortune-teller during a divination: brushes of fine hair - the largest to powder her face, the smaller to apply lipstick, the smaller still for the paint that Yennefer used on her eyelashes; pencils and sticks for her eyelids and eyebrows; tweezers and silver spoons; jars and bottles made of porcelain and milky-white glass containing, as he knew, potions and ointments made of commonplace ingredients such as soot, goose grease and carrot juice and dangerous ingredients such as the mysterious mandrake, antimony, belladonna, cannabis, dragon's blood and the concentrated venom of giant scorpions. And finally, the air was filled with the scent of lilac and gooseberries - the perfume she always wore.

Her presence was felt in these objects. In this scent.

But she was not there.

He went downstairs, feeling a growing anxiety and rising anger. At everything.

Angry at the cold and congealed scrambled eggs which the innkeeper, distracted from feeling up the girl who worked in the kitchen, served him. Particularly annoyed that the girl was barely twelve years old and tears stood in her eyes.

The warm spring weather and the joyful noise of street life did nothing to alleviate Geralt's mood. There was still nothing he liked about Aedd Gynael, which was an unpleasant parody of all the small cities he had ever known - infinitely more noisy, more humid, dirtier and more annoying.

He still caught the faint odour of refuse in his clothes and hair. He decided to go to the baths.

There, he was irritated by the expression of the bath attendant, who stared at the witcher's medallion and his sword as it lay on the edge of the tub. Geralt

was angered at the fact that the bath attendant had not offered him the services of a young woman. He had no intention of making use of such a girl, but the fact that they offered such a service to everybody except him enraged him.

When he left, despite the clean scent of the soap on his body, the witcher's mood had not improved and Aedd Gynael seemed no better. Still there was nothing that pleased him. He didn't like the piles of manure littering the streets. He didn't like the beggars crouched around the temple walls. He didn't like the slapdash inscription painted on the walls: ELVES: SEGREGATION NOW!

He was denied entrance to the castle, being told to seek out the alderman of the Guild of Merchants. This upset him. It also upset him when a senior guildsman, an elf, told him to look for the alderman in the market place with a look of contempt and superiority, which was strange for someone about to be forced into a ghetto.

The market place swarmed with people, stalls, wagons, horses, cattle and flies. Upon a dais, a pilloried convict was pelted with mud and dung by a mob of people. Showing admirable composure, the convict mocked his tormentors with a string of obscenities, barely raising his voice.

For Geralt, having seen such set ups before, the reason for the alderman's presence in the throng became clear. The travelling traders inflated their prices to cover the bribes they had to pay and the bribes had to trace back to somebody. The alderman, well aware of the custom, attended to it in person so the other merchants didn't have to bother.

He officiated under a dirty blue canopy, held up by poles. There was a table beneath it besieged by angry customers. Alderman Herbolth sat behind the table, his contempt and disdain for all and sundry showing clearly on his pallid face.

"Hey! Where are you going? "

Geralt slowly turned around. He immediately suppressed his anger and frustration, becoming a sliver of cold, hard ice. He couldn't allow himself to

express any emotion. The man who approached him had hair as yellow as an oriole and brows of the same colour above pale and

empty eyes. Slim hands with long fingers rested on his belt of large brass plates which bore a sword, a mace and two daggers.

"Yeah," said the man. "I know you. You're the witcher, right? Here to see Herbolth?"

Geralt nodded, keeping his eyes on the man's hands. He knew it was dangerous to lose sight of a man's hands.

"I've heard of you, monster slayer" said the blonde man as he paid careful attention to Geralt's hands. "Although I don't believe we've ever met, you've probably heard of me. My name is Ivo Mirce. But everyone calls me The Cicada."

The witcher nodded to confirm that he had heard of him. He also knew that there was a price on head of The Cicada in Wyzim, Caelf and Vattweir. If they had asked his opinion, he would have told them it was too little. But they hadn't, so he didn't.

"Okay," said The Cicada. "I know that the alderman's waiting for you. You can pass. But your sword, my friend, will have to stay here. I'm paid to keep an eye on proceedings. Nobody can approach Herbolth armed. Got it?"

Geralt shrugged indifferently and unbuckled his belt, wrapping it around his scabbard and handing it to The Cicada. The Cicada gave a slight smile.

"Goodness me," he said. "Such manners, not a word of protest. I knew the rumours about you were exaggerated. I wish you'd asked me for my sword, just so you could see my response."

"Hey, Cicada!" the alderman suddenly cried, rising, "Leave him be! Come over here Lord Geralt, welcome, welcome. Away, gentlemen, merchants, leave us alone for a moment. Your interests give way to issues of greater importance to the city. Submit your requests to my secretary!"

The outpouring of false welcome didn't fool Geralt. He knew that it served only as an opportunity for bargaining. The merchant wanted some time to consider whether the bribes were high enough.

"I'll bet that The Cicada was trying to provoke you." Herbolth casually raised his hand in reply to the witcher's equally hurried bow. "Don't worry about it. The Cicada only draws his sword when ordered. True, he doesn't much like that, but as long as I'm in charge, he'll have to obey or he'll be sent on his way. Don't worry about it."

"Why the hell do you need someone like The Cicada, alderman? Surely it's not that dangerous here?"

"It's not dangerous because of the presence of The Cicada." Herbolth smiled. "His fame travels far and he's on my side. You know, Aedd Gynvail and all the other cities in the Toine Valley belongs to the Governors of Rakverelin. Recently, these governors are changing all the time. It's not clear why, because nothing else changes and every other one is half or quarter elf; cursed breed. They're responsible for all the problems around here."

Geralt didn't add that the current situation could also be down to those actually driving the wagon, because the joke, although well known, wasn't funny to everyone.

"Every new governor," continued Herbolth, warming up, "starts by getting rid of all the chief magistrates and aldermen and replacing them with friends and relatives. But after what The Cicada did to the envoy of one of the governors, nobody has dared to replace me and I'm the longest serving alderman from the oldest regime, so old, even I don't recall which. But here we are, chatting away and polishing peanuts, as my first wife used to say, may she rest in peace. Let's get to the point. What kind of creature crept into our dump?"

"Azeugl."

"I've never heard of such a creature. I suppose it's dead?"

"Yes, it's dead."

"And how much is it going to cost the municipal fund? Seventy?"

"One hundred."

"Well, well, Sir Witcher! I think you've been at the henbane! One hundred marks for killing a foul worm living in a shit heap?"

"Worm or not, alderman, it devoured eight people, as you told me yourself."

"People? Good one! The monster, as I told you, ate old Hylaste, who had famously never been sober, an old woman from the suburbs and some of Sulirad the Rafter's children. We didn't even know how many straight away, because even Sulirad doesn't know how many children he has. He makes them at such a rate, he doesn't have time to count them. Some people! Eighty."

"If I hadn't killed the zeugl, it would have eventually eaten somebody more important. The apothecary, say. Where would you buy your chancre ointment? One hundred."

"One hundred marks is a lot of money. I don't know if I'd give you that much for a nine-headed hydra. Eighty five."

"A hundred, Lord Herbolth. It may not have been a nine-headed hydra, but nobody here, including the famous Cicada, was able to handle the zeugl."

"Because nobody here wanted to go wading through trash and manure. My final offer: ninety."

"One hundred."

"Ninety five, by all the demons and devils!"

"Agreed."

"Well." Herbolth smiled broadly. "That's settled. Do you always barter so wonderfully, witcher?"

"No." Geralt did not smile. "It's quite rare. I just wanted to impress you, alderman."

"That you did and may the plague take you," laughed Herbolth. "Hey, Peregrine! Come here! Bring me the ledger and a purse and count out ninety marks for me."

"We agreed on ninety five."

"What about tax?"

The witcher cursed softly. The alderman signed the receipt with a flourish, then scratched his ear with the end of the quill.

"I hope that the dump is safe now. Eh, witcher?"

"It should be. There was only one zeugl. Although it's possible that it reproduced. Zeugls are hermaphrodites, like snails."

"Now what are you saying?" Herbolth looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Reproduction takes two: a male and a female. Is it possible for zeugls to multiply like fleas or mice in a rotten straw mattress? Every idiot knows there are no male and female mice; they are all identical and just hatch by themselves from the rotten straw."

"And snails hatch from damp leaves," added the secretary, Peregrine, still busy placing the coins in piles.

"Indeed, everybody knows," Geralt agreed, smiling reassuringly. "That there are no male or female snails. There are only snails and leaves. And anyone who says otherwise is wrong."

"Enough," the alderman cut in, eyeing him suspiciously. "No more about bugs. I want to know if there's still something dangerous in the dump, and please have the courtesy reply plainly and succinctly."

"In a month or so, you'll have to search the dump again, preferably with dogs. Young zeugls are not very dangerous."

"Can't you do that, witcher? We can discuss prices."

"No." Geralt took the money from Peregrine. "I have no intention of staying in your lovely town for a week, never mind a month."

"It's interesting that you should say that." Herbolth smiled wryly, looking him in the eye. "Very interesting, in fact. Because I think you're going to stay here longer."

"You think wrongly, alderman."

"Really? You came here with that dark-haired sorceress, I've forgotten her name... Guinevere, I think. You stayed with her at The Sturgeon. They say in the same room."

"What of it?"

"Whenever she visits Aedd Gynvael, she does not leave too quickly. And she's been here many times before."

Peregrine smiled significantly; a wide, toothless grin. Herbolth still met Geralt's eyes, unsmiling. Geralt smiled as threateningly as he could.

"Anyway, what do I know?" The alderman looked away and dug a heel into the ground. "And I don't give a shit. But just so you know, the wizard Istredd is a very important person. He is irreplaceable in this town, priceless, I might say. He is respected by all, locals and outsiders too. We don't stick our noses into his business, magical or otherwise."

"Perhaps rightly so," agreed the witcher. "Where does he live, if I may ask?"

"Don't you know? It's right here. Do you see that house? The tall, white one between the warehouse and the armoury, standing up like a candle stuck in an arse. But you won't find him there now. Istredd recently unearthed something next to the south wall and is currently digging around there like a mole. So many people were milling around the excavation site, that I went to take a look. I politely asked him: Why, sir, are you digging in the ground

like a small child?' and everybody started to laugh, 'What's hidden there, in the ground?' He looked at me as if I were a beggar and said: 'History.' What history is that, then?' I asked, and he replied: 'The history of mankind. Answers to questions. The answer to what was and what shall be.' There was only a pile of shit here before the town was built,' said I, 'fallow land, shrubs and werewolves. And what will be depends on who is next governor appointed by the administration of Rakverelin - another mangy half-elf, I fear. The earth holds no answers, only worms.' Do you think he listened? He's still there, still digging. If you want to see him, go to the south wall."

"Oh, Lord Alderman," Peregrine snorted. "He's at home now. He doesn't care about the excavations now that..."

Herbolth looked at him menacingly. Peregrine turned away and coughed, shifting from one foot to the other. The witcher continued to smile forcedly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Yes, ahem, ahem." The alderman cleared his throat. "Who knows, maybe Istredd has returned home now. What's it to me, anyway?"

"Take care of yourself, alderman," said Geralt, not bothering with the pretence of a bow. "I wish you a good day."

He returned to The Cicada, who met him with a clinking of weaponry. Without a word, the witcher reached for his sword which The Cicada held in the crook of his elbow. The Cicada stood back.

"In a hurry, witcher?"

"Yes, I'm in a hurry."

"I took a look at your sword."

Geralt threw him a look that could never have been considered warm.

"That's something to boast about," nodded the witcher. "Few have seen it. Even fewer are able to talk about it."

"Ho, ho!" The Cicada grinned. "That sounded so much like a threat, I've got goosebumps. I've always been curious, witcher, why people are so afraid of you. Now I think I know why."

"I'm in a hurry, Cicada. Give me my sword, if you please."

"Smoke in the eyes, witcher, nothing but smoke in the eyes. You confound people like a beekeeper smokes out bees with your stone-like faces, your bravado and your reputation -likely contrived by yourselves. The bees stupidly flee the smoke rather than stinging you in the arse, which would swell up just like any other's. They say that you don't feel like humans do. Nonsense. If any one of you got a good jab, you'd feel it."

"Finished?"

"Yes," said The Cicada as he gave the witcher his sword. "Do you know what intrigues me, witcher?"

"Yes. Bees."

"No. I wonder, if you came walking down an alley, armed with your sword, from one direction and me from the other, which of us would reach the end of the street? It's something, in my opinion, worthy of a bet."

"Why are you pestering me, Cicada? Are you looking for a fight? Is that what you want?"

"Not especially. I'm just curious to see if there's any truth to what people say. That you witchers are so good in battle because you have no heart, no soul, no mercy and no conscience. Is that all? Because they say exactly the same things about me. And not without reason. So I'm terribly curious to know which of us two that entered that alley would come out alive. Huh? Is it worth a bet? What do you think?"

"I told you that I'm in a hurry. I won't waste time splitting hairs. I'm not a gambling man, but if it ever occurs to you to get in my way while I'm walking down an alley, I strongly recommend that you think again."

"Smoke." The Cicada smiled, "Smoke in the eyes and nothing more. See you later, witcher; who knows, maybe in an alley somewhere?"

"Who knows?"

IV

"Here we can talk freely. Sit down, Geralt."

The most striking thing about the studio was the impressive number of books that occupied the vast interior. Thick tomes filled the libraries that lined the walls, bowing the shelves and piled up on cupboards and chests. The witcher assessed that they must have cost a fortune. There was certainly no lack of other common elements of decor: a stuffed crocodile, a dried porcupine fish hanging from the ceiling, a dusty skeleton, an imposing collection of bottles filled with alcohol that contained every beast imaginable: centipedes, spiders, snakes, toads and countless human and non-human samples, mostly internal organs. There was even a homunculus, or something that resembled a homunculus; it could just as easily have been a preserved foetus.

Geralt wasn't particularly impressed with the collection. He had lived at Yennefer's house in Vengerberg for six months and she possessed an even more interesting collection, including a phallus of unprecedented proportions, apparently from a mountain troll. She also had a magnificent stuffed unicorn, upon whose back she liked to make love. Geralt was of the opinion that the only place even less suited for lovemaking would be the back of a live unicorn. In contrast to the witcher, who considered a bed a luxury and valued all possible applications such a wonderful piece of furniture offered, Yennefer was wildly inventive. Geralt recalled pleasant moments spent with the sorceress on the slope of a roof, in the hollow of a dead tree, on the balcony, and those of others, the railing of a bridge, a canoe, rocking unsteadily on a rushing stream and lastly while levitating thirty fathoms above the ground. But worst of all was the unicorn. One happy day, however, the thing collapsed beneath them. It ripped open and broke into pieces, causing the pair to burst into wild laughter.

"What amuses you so, witcher?" Istredd asked, sitting behind a long table upon which rested a large number of rotting skulls, bones and rusty iron pots.

"Every time I see stuff like this," the witcher sat opposite, indicating to the bottles and jars, "I wonder to myself whether it's possible to practice magic without the use of such monstrosities, considering the sight of them turns the stomach."

"It's a matter of taste," said the sorcerer, "And tradition. What's repugnant to some, doesn't affect others in the same way. And you, Geralt, what disgusts you? I'm curious to know what is considered repugnant by someone who, so I've heard, is able to wade neck deep through filth and garbage if the price is right. Please don't take this question as an insult or provocation. I'm genuinely curious to know what can provoke a feeling of disgust in a witcher."

"Didn't I happen to hear that you keep a jar containing the menstrual blood of a maiden, Istredd? It disgusts me to picture you, a professional magician, bottle in hand, on your knees, trying to collect this precious liquid - drop by drop - from the source, so to speak."

"Good one." Istredd smiled. "I speak, of course, of your incisive wit, because you're not right about the contents of the vial."

"But sometimes you need to use blood, right? Certain spells, or so I've heard, you can't even begin without the blood of a virgin; all the better if she was killed by a bolt of lightning on a cloudless night. I'm just curious, what makes it better than that of an old prostitute who fell off a wall while drunk?"

"Nothing," agreed the magician, a friendly smile on his lips. "But if it gets out that the blood of a pig works just as well, considering how much easier it is to get, the riffraff would start experimenting with sorcery. But if the rabble has to collect the blood of the maiden that interests you so much, or dragon's tears, tarantula venom, broth made with the severed hands of a newborn or a corpse exhumed at midnight, most of them will think twice about such an enterprise."

They were silent for a moment. Istredd, giving the impression of being deeply absorbed in his thoughts, tapped his fingernails on a cracked skull, browned and missing the lower jaw, which lay before him. His finger traced the jagged edge of the hole that started at the temporal bone. Geralt looked at him discretely. He wondered how old the sorcerer was. He knew that the most talented magicians were able to stop the aging process permanently at their desired age. Men, by reason of reputation and prestige, preferred an age of advanced maturity, suggesting wisdom and experience. Women, such as Yennefer, cared less about prestige and more about attractiveness. Istredd was in the prime of life and did not seem to be more than forty. He had straight, slightly greying hair that fell to his shoulders and many small wrinkles on his forehead, around his mouth and at the corners of his eyes. Geralt did not know if the depth and wisdom in those gentle grey eyes was natural or caused by a spell. After a while, he came to the conclusion that he didn't give a damn.

"Istredd," he interrupted the awkward silence. "I came here because I wanted to see Yennefer. Although she's not here, you invited me in. To talk. About what? How the riffraff are trying to break your monopoly on the use of magic? I know that you count me as part of this rabble. It's nothing new to me. For a moment, I had the impression that you were going to be different from your colleagues who have often struck up a conversation with me for the sole purpose of expressing how much they don't like me."

"I will not apologise for my, as you say, colleagues," said the magician calmly, "I understand them, because, like them, I had to work hard to master the magical arts. When I was just a boy and all my peers were running through the fields with bows and arrows, fishing or playing leapfrog, I pored over manuscripts. The bitter cold from the stony floors of the tower froze my bones and joints. That was in the summer; in the winter it cracked my tooth enamel as well. The dust from the old books and scrolls made my cough until tears came to my eyes, and my teacher, old Roedskilde, never missed an opportunity to take his whip to my back, apparently when I was not making enough progress in my studies. I didn't get to fight, or chase girls or drink beer during the years when such diversions are best appreciated."

"Poor thing," replied the witcher with a frown. "Indeed, it brings tears even to my eyes."

"Why the sarcasm? I'm trying to explain to you why magicians don't like shamen, enchanters, healers, witches and witchers. Call it what you want, even simple jealousy, but here lies the reason for antipathy. It bothers us when we see magic, an art we were taught to regard as a gift to the adept, a privilege of the elite and the most sacred mystery of all, fall into the hands of the inferior and the lay practitioner. Even if the magic in question is incompetent, wretched and ridiculous. That is why my colleagues don't like you. I don't like you, either."

Geralt was sick and tired of this conversation, so much so that a growing feeling of unease crawled like a snail across the back of his neck and down his spine. He looked straight into Istredd's eyes and gripped the edge of the table with the tips of his fingers.

"This is about Yennefer, isn't it?"

The sorcerer raised his head, still lightly tapping his fingers on the skull lying on the table.

"Bravo for your insight," he said, holding the witcher's gaze. "Please accept my congratulations. Yes, this is about Yennefer."

Geralt fell silent. Once, long ago, many, many years ago, while still a young witcher, he was waiting to ambush a manticores. He felt the manticores approaching. He could not see it or hear it, but that feeling; he could never forget that feeling. And now he felt exactly the same.

"Your insight," said the wizard, "saves a lot of time that otherwise would have been spent beating around the bush. So now the matter is out in the open."

Geralt did not respond.

"My deep friendship with Yennefer," continued Istredd, "started quite some time ago, witcher. It has long been a friendship without obligations, based

on long or short, but more or less regular, periods spent with one another. This type of casual relationship is often practiced amongst our profession. It's just that it's suddenly not enough for me. I decided to propose that she remain with me permanently."

"And what was her reply?"

"She'd think about it. So I gave her time to think. I know it's not an easy decision for her."

"Why are you telling me this, Istredd? What's your reasoning, other than a commendable but rare sense of nobility amongst those of your profession? What's the point of this honesty?"

"Practicality," sighed the magician, "because, as you well know, it is you who prevents Yennefer from making a decision. So I'm asking you to leave voluntarily. Disappear from her life and stop getting in our way. In short, go to hell. It would be best if you leave quietly and without saying goodbye, which, as she has informed me, is what you usually do."

"Truly," Geralt forced a smile, "Your honesty amazes me more and more. I expected many things, but not this. Didn't it occur to you that it might be better that, instead of asking, you could have hit me with a ball of lightning and reduced me to a pile of carbon. Then there

would be nothing standing in your way, just a sooty smudge on the wall. That method would have been easier and safer. Because, as you know, a request can be denied but not a ball of lightning."

"I didn't take into account the possibility that you might refuse."

"Why? Isn't this strange request nothing more than a warning in advance of a ball of lightning or some other spell? Maybe you're going to back up your request with more persuasive arguments? A sum that's likely to sate the appetite of a greedy witcher? How much is it worth, to clear me from the path that leads to your happiness?"

The sorcerer stopped tapping the skull, placing the palm of his hand on top of it and squeezing. Geralt watched his knuckles go white.

"It wasn't my intention to insult you with such an offer," he said. "Far from it. But... if... Geralt, I'm a magician, and not a bad one. I don't want to brag about my powers, but many of your wishes, if you want to make them, I should be able to fulfil. Some of them with ease."

He made a casual gesture with his hand, as if shooing a mosquito. The air above the table suddenly swarmed with fabulously coloured apollo butterflies.

"My wish, Istredd," growled the witcher, waving the insects away from his face, "Is that you stop getting between Yennefer and I. I'm not interested in any offer you have to make. You should have made your proposal to Yennefer while she was with you. Formerly. Because that was in the past. Now it's the present and she is with me. Am I supposed to leave just to make your life easier? I refuse. Not only will I not help you, I will do everything in my modest power to hinder you. As you can see, I'm no less honest than you."

"You have no right to refuse. None at all."

"What do you take me for, Istredd?"

The magician looked him straight in the eyes, leaning across the table.

"For a fleeting affair. A momentary infatuation, at best, a whim, one adventure among the hundreds Yenna has had, because Yenna loves to play with emotions: she is impulsive and unpredictable in her caprices. Now, having exchanged a few words with you, I've rejected the possibility that she's just using you as a plaything. But believe me, this is so often the case."

"You have not understood my question."

"You're wrong. I understood. But I have deliberately referred only to Yenna's emotions. Because you're a witcher and can experience no emotion whatsoever. You don't want to grant my request because you feel that she

needs you, you think... Geralt, you're with her just because she wants it and you'll be with her for as long as she wants. And what you feel is just a reflection of her emotions, the interest she shows in you. By all the demons in hell, Geralt, you're not a child, you know what you are. You're a mutant. Don't get me wrong, I don't say this to denigrate or insult you. I'm just stating a fact. You're a mutant, and a main feature of

your mutation is that you're completely insensible to emotion. That's the way you're created so that you can do your job. Do you understand? You cannot feel anything. All that you regard as emotion is nothing more than cellular memory, somatic, if you know what that word means."

"Suppose that I do."

"All the better. Listen then. I'm asking you something that I could only ask of a witcher, not a human. I can be honest with a witcher, but I could not afford such truthfulness with a human. Geralt, I want to give Yenna understanding and stability, affection and happiness. Can you, hand on heart, say the same? No, you cannot. For you, these words are meaningless. You chase after Yenna, happy as a child for the occasional kindness shown to you. Like a feral cat, used to having stones pitched at it, pleased that you have finally found someone who is not afraid to pet him. Do you know what I mean? Oh, I know you understand, you're not stupid, that's clear. You see for yourself why you have no right to reject my kind offer."

"I have as much right to refuse," drawled Geralt, "as you do to ask, therefore our rights cancel each other out and we're back to our starting point, the point being this: Yen, apparently not bothered by my mutations and their consequences, is now with me. You made her a proposal, as is your right. She said that she'll think about it? That's her right. You have the impression that I'm making it difficult for her to decide? Why she hesitates? That I'm the cause of this hesitation? That's also my right. If she hesitates, then it's presumably not without reason. Maybe it's something I give to her, even if it's something there is no word for in the vocabulary of witchers."

"Listen..."

"No. You listen to me. She was once with you, you say? Who knows, perhaps it's not I, but you who is the fleeting infatuation, the caprice, the impulsive fling that's so typical of her. Istredd, I can't even rule out whether or not she only perceives you as a plaything. That, Sir Wizard, cannot be excluded solely on the basis of this conversation. It seems to me that, in this case, the plaything is the one who speaks with more grandiloquence."

Istredd did not even flinch. Geralt admired his composure. However, the prolonged silence seemed to indicate that the blow had hit the target.

"You're playing with words," said the magician, at last. "You revel in them. You use words to replace the normal human feelings you don't possess. Your words do not express feelings, only sounds, like those produced when you knock upon a skull. Because you are as empty as this skull. You have no right to..."

"Enough," Geralt interrupted sharply, perhaps too sharply. "Stop denying that I have rights, I'm sick of it, do you hear? I said that our rights are equal. No, damn it, mine are greater."

"Really?" The magician paled slightly, to Geralt's great pleasure. "Why is that?"

The witcher thought for a moment and decided to finish it.

"Because," he burst out, "Last night she made love with me and not you."

Istredd picked up the skull, stroking it. His hand, to Geralt's annoyance, was not even shaking.

"According to you, that affords you some rights?"

"Only one. The right to draw conclusions."

"A ha," the magician said slowly, "Fine. Well. She made love with me this morning. You have the right to draw your own conclusions. I know I already did."

The silence lasted a long time. Geralt desperately sought an answer. He couldn't find one.

"Enough chatter," he said finally, rising, angry with himself because it sounded abrupt and stupid. "I'm going."

"Then go to hell," said Istredd, just as abruptly, without looking up.

When she entered, he was lying on the bed fully clothed with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He looked at her.

Yennefer slowly closed the door behind her. She was beautiful.

So beautiful, he thought. Everything about her is beautiful. And dangerous. The colours she wears; the contrast of black and white. Beauty and terror. Her natural, raven curls. Her high cheekbones, accentuated by the crease that forms when she smiles - if she deigns to smile -her lips, wonderfully small and pale beneath her lipstick. Her eyebrows, wonderfully irregular when she washes away the kohl at the end of the day. Her nose, wonderfully long. Her small hands, wonderfully nervous, restless and adept. Her figure, fine and slim, emphasised by the tightness of her belt. Her slender legs, as they move beneath her black skirt. Beautiful.

Without a word she sat down at the table and rested her chin on her hands.

"Well, come on, let's get started," she said, "This lengthy, dramatic silence is too banal for me. Let's get on with it. Get off the bed and stop gazing at the ceiling looking all offended. The situation is already quite silly and there's no reason to make it even sillier. Get up, I say."

He got up willingly and, without hesitation, sat down astride the chair opposite her. She didn't look away from him, as might be expected.

"As I said, let's fix this and fix it quickly. To avoid making the situation even more uncomfortable, I will quickly answer a few questions without you having to ask them. Yes, it's true that in choosing to ride with you to Aedd Gynael, I knew that I was going to see Istredd and knew that, having met up with him, I would sleep with him. I didn't realise that it

would become public knowledge and that you would end up bragging to each other about it. I now know how you feel, and for that I'm sorry. But no, I do not feel guilty."

He was silent.

Yennefer shook her head, her black, shimmering curls cascaded onto her shoulders.

"Geralt, say something."

"He..." Geralt cleared his throat. "He calls you Yenna."

"Yes," she looked away. "And I call him Val. That's his name. Istredd is a nickname. I have know him for years, Geralt. He is very dear to me. Don't look at me like that. You are also very dear to me. And therein lies the whole problem."

"Are you thinking about accepting his proposal?"

"Just so you know, I'm thinking about it. As I told you, we've known each other for years. Since... many years. We share interests, goals and ambitions. We understand each other without words. He can support me, and who knows, there may come a day when I need support. And above all... he... he loves me. I think."

"I won't stand in your way, Yen."

Her head jerked up and her violet eyes shone with pale fire.

"In my way? Don't you understand anything, you idiot? If you were in my way, just a hindrance, I could be rid of you in the blink of an eye; teleport you to the end of Cape Bremervoor or create a tornado to transport to the country of Hanna. With a little effort, I could turn you into a piece of quartz and put you in my garden, in the flowerbed with the peonies. I could brain-wash you so that you'd forget who I am and what my name is. This would be the ideal solution, because then I could simply say: 'It was fun, bye.' I

could walk away quietly, just like you did when you ran away from my house in Vengerberg."

"Don't shout, Yen, there's no need to be so aggressive. And don't bring up Vengerberg again, we agreed not to talk about it anymore. I'm not angry with you, Yen, and I'm not blaming you. I know that you can't be held to common mores. And it hurts... it kills me, the thought that I'll lose... this cellular memory. Atavistic remnants of feeling in a mutant devoid of emotion..."

"I can't stand it when you talk like that!" she burst out. "I hate it when you use that word. Never use it in my presence again. Never!"

"Does it change facts? In the end, I'm still a mutant."

"It's not a fact. Do not say that word in my presence."

The black kestrel, standing on the deer's horns, flapped its wings and scratched with its claws. Geralt looked at the bird, at its yellow, unmoving eyes. Yennefer again rested her chin on her hands.

"Yen."

"I'm listening, Geralt."

"You promised to answer my questions. Questions that I don't even need to ask. There is one very important one. One that I've never asked. The one I'm afraid to ask. Answer it."

"I cannot, Geralt," she said, firmly.

"I don't believe you, Yen. I know you too well."

"You can never truly know a sorceress."

"Answer my question, Yen."

"The answer is: I don't know. But what kind of answer is that?"

Silence. The murmur of the hubbub from the street died down.

The fiery glow of the setting sun pierced the slits of the shutters and cast slanting rays of light across the room.

"Aedd Gynvail," muttered the witcher. "A shard of ice... I felt it. I knew this city... was my enemy. Malignant."

"Aedd Gynvail," she repeated slowly. "The sleigh of the elven queen. Why, Geralt?"

"I'm following you, Yen, because the reins of my sleigh became entangled with the runners of yours. And the blizzard rages around me. And the frost. And the cold."

"The warmth in you would melt the shard of ice with which I struck you," she murmured. "So the spell would vanish and you would see me as I really am."

"Lash your white horses, Yen, and make them fly north to where the thaw never comes. So that the ice will never melt. I want to us to soon be together in your castle of ice."

"The castle doesn't exist." Yennefer's lips trembled and twisted. "It is a symbol. And we drive ourselves towards an unobtainable dream. Because I, the Queen of the Elves, long for warmth. That is my secret. So every year I take my sleigh out to the city, into the swirling snow, and every year someone, struck by my spell, tangles the reins of his sleigh with the runners of mine. Every year. Every year, someone new. Never ending. Because while the warmth I desire destroys the spell, it also destroys the magic and the charm. My chosen one, once star-struck by ice, suddenly becomes an ordinary nobody. And I, icy spell thawing before their eyes, become no better than the others... mere mortals."

"And from that pristine whiteness, spring emerges," he said "And Aedd Gynvail appears, an ugly city with a beautiful name. Aedd Gynvail and its pile of trash, a huge stinking heap of garbage that I have to enter because I'm paid to do so, because I was created to deal with the filth that fills others

with fear and disgust. I have been deprived of the ability to feel, so I was not able to feel the horror of that disgusting squalor, so I would not retreat nor flee before it, full of dread. Yes, I have been deprived of emotion. But not completely. Whoever did it, botched the job."

He fell silent. The black kestrel rustled its feathers, opening and closing its wings.

"Geralt."

"I'm listening."

"Now you will answer my question. The question that I've never asked. That which I was afraid to ask... I'm also not going to ask it today, but please answer it. Because... because I really wish to hear your reply. It's the one thing, the one word you have never said. Say it, Geralt. Please."

"I cannot."

"Why is that?"

"Don't you know?" He smiled sadly. "My answer would be just a word. A word that doesn't express feelings, a word that doesn't express emotions, because I am devoid of them. A word that would only be a sound, like the sound a cold and empty skull makes when it's struck."

She looked at him in silence. Her eyes, wide open, took on a deep violet colour.

"No, Geralt," she said. "That's not true. Or only partly true. You are not deprived of feelings. Now I see. Now I know that..."

She fell silent.

"Stop, Yen. You've already decided. Do not lie. I know you. I see it in your eyes."

She looked away. He knew.

"Yen," he whispered.

"Give me your hand," she said.

She took his hand in hers; he immediately felt a tingling and the throbbing of blood in the veins of his forearm. Yennefer whispered a spell in a calm, measured voice, but he saw drops of sweat appear on her pale forehead from the effort and her pupils dilate with the pain.

Releasing his arm, she stretched out her hands and raised them in a gesture of gentle caress -stroking an invisible shape, slowly, up and down. Between her fingers, the air began to grow more dense and opaque, curling and wavering like smoke.

He was gazing in awe. The magic of creation, seen as the pinnacle of magician's achievements, had always fascinated him, much more than illusion and magical transformation. Yes, Istredd was right, he thought, in comparison with such magic, my Signs look ridiculous.

Between Yennefer's hands that trembled with the effort, slowly materialised the form of a coal-black bird. The sorceress' fingers gently caressed the slightly ruffled feathers, flat head and curved beak. Yet another movement, hypnotic, fluid and delicate, and the black kestrel, lowering its head, croaked loudly. Its twin, still sitting motionlessly in the corner, responded with a squawk.

"Two kestrels," Geralt said quietly. "Two black kestrels, created via magic. I guess you need both."

"You guess correctly," she said with difficulty. "I need both. I was wrong to think that one would suffice. I was very wrong, Geralt... which irritates me being the proud Queen of Winter, convinced of her own omnipotence. There are some things... you cannot obtain, even through magic. And some gifts you can't accept unless you are able to give something in return... something equally valuable. Otherwise, such a gift will slip through your fingers, like a shard of ice melting in a closed fist. There will remain only regret, a sense of loss and guilt..."

"Yen..."

"I am a sorceress, Geralt. The power I possess over matter is a gift. A gift I reciprocate. I paid for it... with everything I had. There's nothing left."

She fell silent. The sorceress wiped her brow with a trembling hand.

"I was wrong," she repeated. "But I'll fix my mistake. Emotions and feelings..." she touched the black kestrel's head. The bird ruffled its feathers, opening its mute curved beak. "Emotions, whims and lies, fascinations and games. Feelings and the lack thereof... gifts that should not be accepted... lies and truth. What is right? To deny a lie? Or to state a fact? And if the fact is a lie, then what is truth? Who is so full of feelings that it tears them apart and who is a cold and empty shell of a skull? Who? What is right, Geralt? What is the truth?"

"I don't know, Yen. You tell me."

"No," she said and lowered her eyes. It was the first time. He had never seen her do this before. Never.

"No," she repeated. "I cannot, Geralt. I cannot tell you. It will be this bird, born from the touch of your hand, that will tell you. Bird, what is the truth?"

"The truth," declared the kestrel, "is a shard of ice."

VI

Although it seemed to him that he wandered the alleys aimlessly and with no destination in mind, he suddenly found himself near the south wall, at the excavation, amongst a network of trenches that wound chaotically and exposed parts of the ancient foundations, intersecting at the ruins of a stone wall.

Istredd was there. With rolled up shirt sleeves and tall boots, he shouted something to the servants who were using hoes to dig the wall of a trench striped with layers of different colours of earth, clay and charcoal. On some

planks arranged to the side lay blackened bones, broken pieces of pots and other objects; unrecognisable, corroded and covered with rust.

The magician noticed him immediately. After he gave some muttered command to those digging, he jumped out of the trench and walked towards Geralt, wiping his hands on his trousers.

"What do you want?" he asked abruptly.

The witcher, standing motionless before him, did not reply. The men, pretending to work, watched them closely, whispering amongst themselves.

"Hatred shines in your eyes," Istredd frowned. "What do you want, I ask you? Have you made a decision? Where is Yenna? I hope..."

"Don't hold out too much hope, Istredd."

"Oh," said the magician. "What's this I hear in your voice? Do I understand you correctly?"

"What is it that you understand?"

Istredd placed his hands on his hips and glared defiantly at the witcher.

"Let's not deceive each other," he said. "You hate me and I hate you, too. You insulted me with what you said about Yennefer... you know what. I insulted you in a similar way. You offend me and I offend you. Let's settle this like men. I see no other solution. That's why you came here, right?"

"Yes," Geralt said, rubbing his forehead. "You're right, Istredd. That's why I'm here. Without a doubt."

"Perfect. It cannot go on. Only today I learned that, for a few years, Yennefer has been back and forth between us like a rag ball. First she's with me, then she's with you. She'll run away from me to look for you and vice versa. The others that came in between don't count. Only the two of us matter. This can't go on. Out of the two of us, there must be only one."

"Yes," Geralt said, without removing his hand from his forehead. "Yes... you're right."

"In our arrogance," continued the magician, "we thought that Yenna wouldn't hesitate to choose the better of us. As for who was the better, neither of us had any doubt. We came to

the point where, like a pair of urchins, we bragged about the regard she has shown us and, like inexperienced boys, we even divulged the nature of that regard and what it meant. I imagine that, like myself, you've been thinking about it and have realised just how wrong we were. Yenna doesn't want to choose between us, even if we were to accept that choice. Well, we'll have to decide for her. I'm not going to share Yenna with anyone, and the fact that you've come here says the same about you. We know this all too well. As long as there are two of us, neither of us can be sure of her feelings. There must be only one. You understand, right?"

"True." the witcher said, barely moving his tense lips. "The truth is a shard of ice..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What's wrong with you? Are you sick or drunk? Or maybe full of witcher's herbs?"

"I'm fine. Something... I have something in my eye. Istredd, there must be only one. Yes, that's why I've come here. Without a doubt."

"I knew it," said the magician. "I knew that you'd come. Anyway, I'll be honest with you. You anticipated my intentions."

"A ball of lightning?" the witcher smiled wanly.

Istredd frowned.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe a ball of lightning. But certainly not in the back. Honourably, face to face. You are a witcher, it evens things out. Well, let's

decide where and when."

Geralt thought about it. And made a decision.

"The square..." he indicated with his hand. "I passed through it..."

"I know. There's a well there, called the Green Key."

"So, near to the well. Yes. At the well... tomorrow, two hours after sunrise."

"Okay. I'll be punctual."

They stood motionless for a moment, not looking at each other. Finally, the magician muttered something under his breath. He kicked at a block of clay then crushed it with a blow from his heel.

"Geralt?"

"What?"

"Don't you feel stupid?"

"I feel stupid," the witcher admitted reluctantly.

"I'm relieved," muttered Istredd, "because I feel like the ultimate idiot. I never imagined that one day I'd have a fight to the death with a witcher over a woman."

"I know how you feel Istredd."

"Well..." the magician forced a smile. "The fact that this has occurred, that I have decided to do something so completely contrary to my nature, is testament to the fact that... it is necessary."

"I know, Istredd."

"Of course you also know, whichever of us survives will have to immediately flee to the ends of the earth to hide from Yenna?"

"I know."

"And of course you are aware of the fact that, after her rage has cooled off, you will be able to return to her?"

"Of course."

"Well, that's settled," the magician gestured as though he was about to turn away, but after a moment's hesitation he extended his hand. "Until tomorrow, Geralt."

"Until tomorrow," the witcher shook his proffered hand. "Until tomorrow, Istredd."

VII

"Hey, Witcher!"

Geralt lifted his head from surface of the table, upon which, while lost in his thoughts, he'd drawn fancy curlicues in the beer that had spilled.

"It wasn't easy to find you." Alderman Herbolth sat down and pushed aside the jugs and tankards. "At the inn they said you had gone to the stables, but at the stables I found only your horse and packs. And now you're here... It's probably the foulest tavern in town. Only the worst rabble comes here. What are you doing here?"

"Drinking."

"I see. I wanted to talk with you. Are you sober?"

"As an infant."

"Glad to hear it."

"What do you want, Herbolth? I am, as you can see, busy." Geralt smiled at the girl who placed another jug on the table.

"Rumour has it," frowned the alderman, "that you and the magician have decided to kill each other."

"That's our business. His and mine. Mind your own business."

"No, it's not just your business." Herbolth disagreed. "We need Istredd, we can't afford another magician."

"Then go to the temple and pray for his victory."

"Do not mock," barked the alderman. "And don't get clever with me, vagabond. By the gods, if I didn't know that the magician will never forgive me, I'd throw you in the hole, into the very bottom of the dungeons, or have you dragged out of the city walls by horses, or even order The Cicada to gut you like a pig. But unfortunately, Istredd is very enthusiastic about matters of honour and he'd never forgive me. I know that he wouldn't."

"That's fantastic." The witcher downed another pint and spat out under the table a blade of straw that had fallen into his tankard. "I'm getting off lightly. Is that all?"

"No," said Herbolth, drawing from inside his coat a purse stuffed with silver. "Here's a hundred marks, witcher, take them and get out of Aedd Gynael. Get out of here, preferably immediately, in any case before sunrise. I told you that we can't afford another magician and I will not allow him to risk his life in a duel with someone like you, for a reason as stupid as..."

He stopped short, even though the witcher hadn't moved.

"Take your foul face away from this table, Herbolth." Geralt said. "And stick your one hundred marks up your arse. Go now, because your face is making me sick and if I have to look at it for much longer, I'm going to puke on you - from your hat to your boots."

The alderman put away the purse and laid both hands on the table.

"No, I won't," he said. "I wanted to do the right thing, but if it's not to be, it's not to be. Fight, flay, burn, hack each other to pieces for this whore who will spread her legs for anyone who wants her. I think that Istredd will be able to finish you off, you cutthroat for hire, and that only your boots will remain, but if not, I'll get you, even before his corpse cools, and break every bone in your body under torture. Not a single part of your body will be left intact, you..."

He didn't have enough time to remove his hands from the table; the witcher's movement was too fast as his hand flew out from under the table, blurred before the alderman's eyes; a dagger struck between his fingers with a dull thud.

"Maybe." the witcher hissed, gripping the hilt of the dagger, staring into Herbolth's face, from which the blood had drained. "Maybe Istredd will kill me. But if not... I'm getting out of here and you, you little shit, don't try to stop me unless you want the filthy streets of this city to fill with blood. Get out of here."

"Mr. Alderman! What's going on here? Hey, you..."

"Easy, Cicada," Herbolth said, slowly moving his hands across the table, as far away from the blade of the dagger as possible. "Nothing's going on. Nothing."

The Cicada re-sheathed his half-drawn sword. Geralt didn't look at him. He didn't look at the alderman as he exited the tavern, under the protection of The Cicada who shielded him from staggering bargemen and coach drivers. He gazed at the little man with a rat-like race and black, piercing eyes sitting a few tables away.

I'm on edge, he thought, alarmed, My hands are shaking. My hands are actually shaking. This is impossible, what's happening to me... Does this mean that...

Yes, he thought, looking at the rat-faced man. / think so.

It's so cold...

He stood up.

He looked at the little man and smiled. Then he parted the flaps of his coat, and withdrew two gold coins from a pouch, tossing them onto the table. They clinked, one spinning and striking the blade of the dagger still stuck in the polished wood.

VIII

The blow fell unexpectedly, the club whistling softly through the dark, so fast that the witcher very nearly didn't have enough time to protect his head as he instinctively raised his arm to block the blow, deflecting it with a nimble twist of his body. He jumped back, dropped to one knee, rolled forwards and got to his feet. He felt a movement of air as the club fell again, evading the blow with a graceful pirouette, spinning between the two dark silhouettes that closed in on him in the darkness, reaching over his right shoulder for his sword.

He had no sword.

Nothing can take away my reflexes, he thought as he lightly leapt back, Routine ? Cellular memory ? I'm a mutant and I react like a mutant, he thought, again falling to one knee to dodge another blow, reaching towards his boot for his dagger. He had no dagger.

He gave a wry smile and was promptly struck on the head with the club. He saw stars as the pain shot right down to his fingertips. He fell to the ground, limp and still smiling.

Someone fell upon him, pressing him into the ground. Somebody else tore his pouch from his belt. His eye caught the flash of a blade and someone knelt on his chest, tearing the neck of his shirt and pulling out his medallion. They immediately let it fall from their fingers.

"By Beelzebub," Geralt heard a gasp, "It's a witcher..."

The other cursed, wheezing.

"He doesn't have a sword... By the gods... It's cursed... Stay away from it, Radgast! Don't touch it!"

The moon momentarily shone through the thinning cloud. Geralt glimpsed an emaciated face above him; male, rat-like, with shining black eyes. He heard footsteps disappearing down the alley that reeked of cats and burnt cooking oil.

The man with the rat face slowly withdrew his knee from Geralt's chest.

"Next time..." Geralt heard the clear whisper, "Next time, when you want to kill yourself, witcher, don't try to get others to do it for you. Just hang yourself by your reins in the stables."

IX

It had rained during the night.

Geralt left the stables, rubbing his eyes and brushing the blades of straw from his hair. The rising sun shone on the wet roofs and glittered like gold in the puddles. The witcher had an unpleasant taste in his mouth and the bump on his head throbbed with a dull ache.

At the gate to the stables sat a black cat, fastidiously washing its paw.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," called the witcher.

The cat froze and glared at him angrily, folding back its ears and hissing, teeth bared.

"I know," nodded Geralt, "I don't like you either. I'm just joking."

He unhurriedly loosened the buckles and laces of his jacket, smoothing out the creases in his clothes and checking that nothing would hamper his freedom of movement. He sheathed his sword behind his back and straightened the hilt above his right shoulder, then he tied a leather bandana across his forehead, pushing his hair behind his ears. He pulled on long gauntlets, bristling with short silver studs.

Once again, he looked at the sun, pupils narrowed into vertical slits, and thought to himself, What a beautiful day. A beautiful day for a fight.

He sighed and spat, then walked slowly through the streets, lined with walls that emitted the sharp, piercing smell of wet plaster and lime.

"Hey, freak!"

He looked around. The Cicada, accompanied by three suspicious-looking, armed individuals sat on a pile of logs arranged along the ditch. He got up, stretched, and went to stand in the middle of the street, carefully avoiding the puddles.

"Where are you going?" he asked, placing his narrow hands on his weapons belt.

"None of your business."

"Just to make things clear, I don't give a damn about the alderman, the magician or this whole shitty town," The Cicada said, slowly emphasising each word. "It's you I'm interested in, witcher. You're not going to reach the end of this street. Do you hear? I want to see how good you are in a fight. It's keeping me up at night. Halt, I say."

"Get out of my way."

"Stop!" shouted The Cicada, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Didn't you understand what I said? We're going to fight! I challenged you! Soon we will see who's the best!"

Geralt shrugged his shoulders, not slowing his pace.

"I challenge you to a fight! You hear me, weirdo?" shouted The Cicada, again blocking his path. "What are you waiting for? Get out your iron! What's this, are you scared? Or maybe you're only bothered by those, like Istredd, who've screwed your sorceress?"

Geralt carried on walking, forcing The Cicada to awkwardly step backwards. The armed men accompanying The Cicada got up from the pile

of logs and started to follow them, maintaining a certain distance. Geralt heard the mud squelching under their feet.

"I challenge you!" repeated The Cicada, reddening then going pallid in turn. "Do you hear, damned witcher? What more do you need? That I spit in your face?"

"So spit."

The Cicada stopped and took a deep breath, preparing to spit. He was staring into the witcher's eyes instead of paying attention to his hands. This was a mistake. Geralt, still not slowing down, swiftly punched him in the mouth with his studded fist. He struck without pausing, only using the momentum of his stride to follow through. The Cicada's lips cracked and burst like crushed cherries. The witcher hauled back and hit him again in the same place, this time stopping briefly, feeling his anger dissipate with the force and vigour the blow carried. The Cicada, spinning on one foot in the mud, the other in the air, vomited blood and fell backwards into a puddle. The witcher, hearing the chink of a blade being drawn behind him, stopped and turned fluidly, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Come on, then," he said, his voice trembling with rage, "Try me."

The one who drew his sword looked into Geralt's eyes. One second. And then he looked away. The rest began to withdraw; slowly at first, then with greater urgency. Gauging the situation, the man with the sword also fell back, his lips moving silently. The man furthest back turned and ran, splashing through the mud. The others froze in place, not attempting to advance.

The Cicada rolled over in the mud and sat up, propping himself up on his elbows, babbling incoherently, spitting out something white with a large amount of red. Walking past him,

Geralt casually kicked him in the face, breaking his cheekbone, the man floundered again in the puddles.

He walked on, not looking back.

Istredd was already at the well, standing there, leaning against the wooden shaft next to the moss encrusted winch. On his belt hung a sword. A beautiful, light sword with a swept hilt, the tip of the scabbard brushing against the cuff of his shiny riding boot. On the magician's shoulder sat a black bird.

A kestrel.

'And here you are, witcher.' Istredd, equipped with a falconer's glove, gently and carefully placed the bird on the roof of the well.

"Here I am, Istredd."

"I didn't think you were coming. I thought you'd left."

"As you can see, I'm still here."

The magician threw his head back and laughed long and loudly.

"She wanted to save us..." he said. "Both of us. But that's beside the point, Geralt. Draw your blade. There can be only one of us."

"You're going to fight with a sword?"

"Does that surprise you? You also fight with a sword. Let's go."

"Why Istredd? Why a sword and not magic?"

The magician paled, his mouth twitched nervously.

"En garde, I say!" he shouted. "No time for questions, that moment has gone! Now is the time for action!"

"I want to know," Geralt said slowly. "I want to know why you choose the sword. I want to know where you got that black kestrel. I have a right to know. A right to know the truth, Istredd."

"The truth?" the magician replied bitterly. "Well, maybe you do. Yes, you do. We have equal rights. The kestrel, you ask? It arrived at dawn, wet from

the rain. It brought a note; so short that I know it by heart: 'Goodbye, Val. Forgive me. I cannot accept your gift, as I have nothing to give you in return that will adequately express my gratitude. That's the truth, Val. The truth is a shard of ice.' Well, Geralt? Are you happy now? Are your rights satisfied?"

The witcher slowly nodded.

"Well," replied Istredd. "Now I'm going to exercise my rights, because I cannot accept the news this letter brings me. I can't be without her... I'd rather... En garde, damn it!"

He twisted and drew his sword with a quick, graceful movement, exhibiting great skill. The kestrel squawked.

The witcher remained motionless, hands at his sides.

"What are you waiting for?" barked the magician.

Geralt slowly raised his head, looked at him for a moment, then turned on his heel.

"No, Istredd," he said quietly. "Goodbye."

"What do you mean, damn it?"

Geralt stopped.

"Istredd," he said over his shoulder, "Don't drag anyone else into this. If you want to do it, just hang yourself by your reins in the stables."

"Geralt!" shouted the magician, his voice cracked suddenly with a note of hopelessness that grated on the ears, "I won't give up! I'll follow her to Vengerberg. I'll go to the ends of the earth to find her! I won't ever give up on her! Know this!"

"Farewell, Istredd."

He stepped into the street without looking back. He walked, paying no attention to the people who hurried out of his way, quickly slamming doors and shutters. He paid no heed to anyone or anything.

He thought about the letter which was waiting for him at the inn.

He accelerated his pace. He knew that at the beside, a black kestrel awaited, wet from the rain, holding a note in its curved beak. He wanted to read it as soon as possible.

Even though he already knew its contents.

The Eternal Fire

This is a fan translation of a French translation of the story from Andrzej Sapkowski's The

Sword of Destiny (L'Epee de la Providence). I am not a native or even a strong French

speaker but I hope that the result is sufficiently readable for my fellow Anglophones.

With the official forums down, I can no longer find the name/handle to credit, sorry! It was a

great help when I got stumped. Thanks also to SA's bonds0097 for the French help, and the TW1 translation team for the

lyrics to Dandelion's songs.

I

"Scum! Worthless singer! Crook!"

Geralt, his curiosity piqued, led his mare to the corner of the alley. Before he had the time to locate the origin of the screams, he heard a crash of glass join the chorus of cries. A jar of cherry jam, he thought. That is the sound of a jar of cherry jam thrown by someone from a great height or with great

force. He perfectly remembered Yennefer, during their time together, throwing in anger the jars like it that she received from her customers. Yennefer was ignorant of all the secrets of making jams: her magic in this area was still desperately incomplete.

A fairly large group of onlookers had amassed around the corner of the alley, at the foot of a narrow pink-painted house. A young woman with blonde hair was standing in her nightgown on a flowered balcony suspended just below the overhanging edge of the rooftop. Soft and rounded shoulders appeared beneath the frills of her bodice. She seized a flower pot with the intention of throwing it.

The thin man, wearing an olive-colored hat adorned with a feather, barely had time to leap back, like a goat, to avoid the impact of the pot that exploded on the ground just in front of him and scattered into a thousand pieces.

"I beg you, Vespula!" he cried. "Don't believe them! I am faithful to you! May I die on the spot if it isn't true!"

"Scoundrel! Demonspawn! Vagabond!" the plump blonde yelled back before retreating into the depths of the house to search, no doubt, for new ammunition.

"Hey, Dandelion!" called the witcher, leading his recalcitrant mount onto the battlefield. "How are you? What's going on?"

"Everything's fine," replied the troubadour, flashing his teeth in a smile. "The usual. Hello, Geralt. What are you doing here? By the plague, look out!"

A pewter cup whistled through the air and rebounded with a crash on the paving stones. Dandelion recovered it from the ground to examine its condition and then tossed it into the gutter.

"Don't forget to take your clothes," shouted the blonde, the ruffles of her nightgown dancing on her buxom chest. "Get out of my sight! Don't set foot here again, you good-for-

nothing musician!"

"That's not mine," Dandelion said in surprise, retrieving the multicolored pants from the ground. "I have, in all my life, never worn a pair of pants like these."

"Go away! I don't want to see you anymore! You... You... You want to know what you're worth in bed? Nothing! Nothing, you hear? You hear, everyone?"

Another flower pot burst forth: the dried stalk of the plant hummed through the air. Dandelion had just enough time to dive. A copper pot of at least two and a half gallons followed the same course, whirling. The crowd of bystanders, standing out of the path of the projectiles, burst into laughter. Most of these clowns applauded, outrageously encouraging the young woman to continue.

"Does she have a crossbow in the house?" the witcher asked uneasily.

"It's possible," replied the poet, craning his neck toward the balcony. "What bric-a-brac she has in there! Did you see these pants?"

"It would be prudent not to stay here. You can come back when she calms down."

"By all the devils," Dandelion grimaced, "I do not return to a house where I've had slander and copper pots thrown in my face. Our brief liaison is finished. Wait a little longer for her to throw me... Oh, by the gods! No! Vespula! Not my lute!"

The troubadour lunged, holding out his arms, tripped and fell, grabbing the instrument at the last moment just above the ground. The lute uttered a groaned song.

"Phew!" he murmured, rising. "I have it. All is well, Geralt, we can go. I left with her, it's true, a coat with a marten-fur collar, but never mind, that will be the price I pay. Because I know she'll never throw the coat."

"Liar! Blackguard!" the blonde bawled before spitting pointedly from the balcony. "Vagabond! Damned crook!"

"Why is she so upset? Have you done something stupid, Dandelion?"

"The usual," the troubadour replied with a shrug. "She requires that I be monogamous, but she herself doesn't hesitate to display another man's pants to the whole world. You heard her name-calling? By the gods, I personally have bedded better women, but I refrain from shouting as much in the middle of the street. Let's go."

"Where do you suggest we go?"

"Where do you think? Certainly not the Temple of the Eternal Fire. Let's go to The Pike's Grotto. I need to settle my nerves."

Without protest, the witcher led his mount behind Dandelion, who was already walking with a purposeful stride through the narrow alley. The troubadour tuned his instrument and plucked a few strings before playing a deep and vibrant chord:

Autumn's scents have pervaded the air, the wind stole the word from our lips. That's the way it must be, please don't shed those diamonds that run down your cheeks.

Dandelion broke off. He waved happily to two girls who passed next to them, carrying baskets of vegetables. The girls giggled.

"What brings you to Novigrad, Geralt?"

"Supplies: a harness, equipment, and this new jacket." The witcher stroked the fresh, brand new leather of his jacket. "What do you think, Dandelion?"

"You are certainly no fashion plate," the bard said, grimacing and stroking the chicken feathers on the puffed sleeve of his own bright blue doublet with the notched collar. "I'm happy to see you in Novigrad, the capital, the center and the cultural heart of the world. An enlightened man can breathe deeply here!"

"Then let's breathe on the next street over," suggested Geralt, seeing a barefooted man squatting, his eyes wide, in the act of defecating in an adjacent alley.

"Your incessant sarcasm grows tiresome," Dandelion said, grimacing again. "In Novigrad, Geralt, there are houses made of brick, paved city streets, a seaport, warehouses, four watermills, slaughterhouses, sawmills, a large manufactory of pointed-toe shoes, and all desirable guilds and artisans, a mint, eight banks and nineteen pawnbrokers, a breathtaking castle and guard tower, and then every sort of diversion: a scaffold, a gibbet equipped with a trapdoor, thirty-five inns, a theater, a zoo, a bazaar and twelve brothels... I don't remember how many temples. Lots, in any case. And all these women, Geralt, proper ones, combed and perfumed... The satins, the velours, the silks, the bustles, the ribbons. Oh, Geralt! The verse writes itself!"

Your home all surrounded by snow, glassy frost covers rivers and lakes. That's the way it must be, please don't show this yearning and grief on your face.

"A new ballad?"

"Yes. It's entitled Winter, but it isn't finished yet. I haven't come up with an ending because of Vespula: I'm shattered and the verse isn't coming to me. By the way, I forgot, how is it going with Yennefer?"

"So-so."

"I understand."

"No, you don't understand a thing. Well then, where is this inn? Is it far from here?"

"Just around the corner. There it is, we've arrived. You see the sign?"

"I see it."

"I greet you warmly!" Dandelion called, smiling broadly at the young woman sweeping the stairs. "My word, has everyone ever told you, dear girl, how lovely you are?"

The girl blushed, tightening her grip on her broom. Geralt thought for a moment that she wanted to strike Dandelion. He was mistaken. The girl gave him a smile, batting her eyelashes. Dandelion, as he usually did, ignored her reaction.

"I salute you and wish you good health! Good day!" Dandelion boomed, entering the inn and striking a resonant chord on his lute, whose strings jumped under the repeated movement of his thumb. "Master Dandelion, the most celebrated poet in the land, pays a visit to your unworthy establishment, innkeeper! He was struck by the desire for a beer! Do you appreciate the magnitude of the honor that I grant you, old miser?"

"I do," the innkeeper replied despondently, emerging from behind the counter. "I am delighted to see you again, master singer. I rejoice to see that you have kept your word. You had indeed promised to return this morning to pay your debts from last night. And I thought it was only hot air, as usual. I am ashamed of my mistake."

"Don't torment yourself without reason, my good man," the troubadour replied cheerfully, "because I don't have any money. We'll discuss it later."

"No," the innkeeper responded coldly. "We will discuss it now. Your credit is dead, master poet. You will not extort from me twice in a row."

Dandelion hung his lute on a hook stuck in the wall and then sat at a table. He removed his hat and meticulously examined the egret plume.

"Do you have any money, Geralt?" he asked, with a trace of hope in his voice.

"I don't. I spent everything I had on my jacket."

"That's not good, that's not good," Dandelion sighed. "By the plague, there isn't a soul to treat us. Innkeeper, why is your establishment so empty

today?"

"It's too early for the regular customers. The workers repairing the temple have already left and gone on to the site, taking the foreman with them."

"No-one else?"

"No-one else, apart from his magnificence, the merchant Biberveldt, who takes his breakfast in the alcove."

"Dainty is here," Dandelion said, pleased. "You should have said so earlier. Come with me to the alcove, Geralt. You know Dainty Biberveldt, the halfling?"

"No."

"That's all right. You'll get to know him. Oh, oh!" called the troubadour, making his way to the side of the room. "I can already pick up the smell and the fragrance of onion soup, so sweet in my nostrils. Yoo-hoo! It's us! Surprise!"

At the base of the alcove's central post, which was decorated with garlands of garlic and bundles of dried herbs, there sat a chubby and curly-haired halfling dressed in a pistachio-green jacket. His right hand held a wooden spoon, the left an earthenware bowl. Seeing Dandelion and Geralt, the halfling froze and opened his mouth wide. His round hazel eyes dilated with terror.

"Hi, Dainty," Dandelion said cheerfully, waving his hat.

The halfling remained motionless, without closing his mouth. Geralt noticed that his hand shook slightly and caused a long morsel of cooked onion hanging from his spoon to swing like a pendulum.

"H-h... Hello to you, Dandelion," he managed to say, stammering and swallowing.

"You have the hiccups? Want me to scare you? Listen: your wife was seen arriving at the toll gate! She'll arrive any second! Gardenia Biberveldt in the

flesh! Haha!"

"You sure can be stupid, Dandelion," the halfling said reproachfully.

Dandelion broke into laughter again, accompanied by two chords played on his lute.

"If only you could see your face, brother: so foolish. Besides, you look at us as if we had horns and tails. It's the witcher who scares you... eh? Perhaps you think that hunting season on halflings has just opened! Perhaps..."

"Stop," Geralt interrupted in annoyance, approaching the table. "Pardon us, friend. Dandelion has just been through a personal tragedy that he has not yet digested. He tries to use jokes to hide his sadness, dejection, and shame."

"Don't tell me." The halfling finally swallowed the contents of his spoon. "Let me guess: Vespula finally threw you out? Is that it, Dandelion?"

"I do not discuss delicate subjects with individuals who are drinking and stuffing themselves while their friends are forced to stand," replied the troubadour, who sat down without waiting to be invited.

The halfling swallowed a spoonful of soup and began to lick up the drips of cheese.

"Sure," he conceded reluctantly. "Join me, then. Have a seat. They're serving onion soup today... Will you have some?"

"In principle, I never eat so early in the morning," Dandelion replied insolently. "But so be it: I'll eat, but certainly not with a dry throat... Hey! Innkeeper! Some beer, if you please! Quickly!"

A girl with her hair pulled back in a long braid that reached her thighs brought some goblets and bowls of soup. Having noticed her mouth surrounded by downy hairs, Geralt considered that she could have nice lips if only she remembered to close them.

"Dryad of the forest!" Dandelion cut in, seizing her hand and kissing the palm. "Sylph! Vision! Divine entity with pale blue eyes like a lake. Beautiful as the break of day. The form of your open lips, so exciting..."

"Give him some beer, quickly," groaned Dainty. "He'll get into trouble."

"Nothing of the kind, nothing of the kind," the bard assured him. "Isn't that right,

Geralt? It's difficult to find someone quieter than the two of us. I, master merchant, am a poet and musician: music softens the mood. The witcher here only poses a threat to monsters. I present to you: Geralt of Rivia, the terror of striga, werewolves and others of their breed. You have certainly heard of him, Dainty!"

"I have..." The halfling darted a suspicious eye over the witcher. "Well, what brings you to Novigrad, master Geralt? Have horrible monsters been poking their muzzles around here? Has someone hired your... er, ah... services?"

"No," the witcher said, smiling. "I am here only to enjoy myself."

"Oh!" Dainty responded nervously, his hairy feet fidgeting where they were hanging a foot above the ground. "That's good..."

"What's good about it?" asked Dandelion, swallowing a spoonful of soup and taking a draught of his beer. "Perhaps you intend to support us, Biberveldt? Pay for our entertainment, you mean? This couldn't have come at a better time. We intend to start by getting a little drunk here in the Pike's Grotto, then hop over to Passionflower, it's an excellent and extravagant brothel where we can hire a half-elf or maybe even a pure one. We still need a patron."

"A what?"

"Someone to pay for it."

"That's what I thought," mumbled Dainty. "Sorry, but I have a business appointment. I don't have, moreover, the funds for such entertainment. Besides, the Passionflower doesn't tolerate non-humans."

"What are we, then? Barn owls? Ah, I understand! Halflings aren't allowed inside. That's true, you're right, Dainty. This is Novigrad, the capital of the world."

"Yes..." said the halfling, continuing to watch the witcher, his lips pinched. "I'll be going now... I have an appointment..."

The door to the alcove opened then with a bang: the room was entered by none other than... Dainty Biberveldt!

"By the gods!" Dandelion exclaimed.

The halfling standing in the doorway in no way differed from the one who was seated at the table, apart from the fact that he was clean and the new arrival was dirty, his clothing disheveled and wrinkled.

"I have you, you son of a bitch," shouted the bedraggled halfling. "Blasted thief!"

His immaculate twin rose abruptly, overturning his stool and scattering the cutlery. Geralt reacted immediately: having seized his sheathed sword from the bench, he struck Biberveldt's neck with the shoulder strap. The halfling dropped and then rolled along the ground before crawling between Dandelion's legs with the intention of reaching the doorway on all fours. His limbs elongated into something like a spider's legs. At the sight, the disheveled Dainty Biberveldt swore, shouted, and leapt back in a movement that threw him against the wooden partition with a bang. Geralt freed his sword from its sheath. He cleared a path by kicking a chair aside and then launched himself after the immaculate Dainty Biberveldt. The latter, no longer having anything in common with the real Dainty Biberveldt except the color of his vest, cleared the threshold of the room like a grasshopper and burst into the common room, barging into the girl with parted lips. Seeing his long legs and his indistinct shape, the girl opened her mouth wide and gave an ear-shattering scream. Making the most of the time

gained from the collision with the girl, Geralt caught up to the creature in the middle of the room and tripped it with a deft kick to the knee.

"Don't try to move, little brother," he warned, gritting his teeth and pressing the point of his sword to the neck of the shocking apparition. "Don't try to move."

"What's going on here?" cried the innkeeper, rushing over wielding the handle of a shovel. "What is that? Guards! Obstruante, run and alert the guard!"

"No!" the creature screamed, flattening itself against the ground and growing more and more deformed. "Have mercy, no!"

"This is not a matter for the guard," agreed the disheveled hobbit, exiting the alcove. "Hold the girl, Dandelion!"

Despite the swiftness of his reaction, the troubadour managed to take hold of Obstruante, who was screaming, and choose his grip with great care. The girl fell at his feet, squealing.

"Easy there, innkeeper," Dainty Biberveldt shot, breathing heavily. "This is a personal matter. We won't trouble the guard. I'll pay for any damage..."

"There's no damage," the master of the house said simply, looking around.

"There will be soon," the pot-bellied halfling continued, "because I'm going to beat the shit out of him... and how! I'm going to do him in. I'll make it so painful for so long that he'll never be able to forget me: we'll break everything in here."

Flattened against the ground like a puddle, the long-legged caricature of Dainty Biberveldt sniffled miserably.

"Out of the question," the innkeeper said coldly, blinking and hefting the handle of his shovel. "Fight in the street or in the yard, master halfling. Not here. Otherwise I'll call the guard. You can count on it. But it's... but it's a monster, that one!"

"Master innkeeper," Geralt intervened evenly, without reducing the pressure of the point of his sword on the creature's neck, "stay calm. No-one will break anything in your place. There will be no damage. The situation is under control. I am a witcher. As you see, the monster is neutralized. But as it is indeed a personal matter, I suggest that we clear it up calmly in the alcove. Let go of the girl, Dandelion, and come here. I have a silver chain in my bag. Take it out and tightly bind the limbs of our gracious stranger: at the elbows, behind his back. Don't move, little brother."

The creature keened softly.

"Well, Geralt," Dandelion said. "It's tied. Go into the alcove. And you, innkeeper, what are you standing there for? I ordered beer. And when I order beer, you must continue serving it until I ask for water."

Geralt shoved the bound creature into the alcove and had it sit at the base of the post. Dainty Biberveldt sat too, eying it malevolently.

"Look at it: a horror," said the halfling. "It looks like a mass of fermenting dough. Look at his nose, Dandelion. It looks like it'll fall off. Son of a bitch. His ears are like my mother-in-law's before she was buried. Brrr!"

"Wait, wait," Dandelion groaned. "You, you're Biberveldt? Uh, yes, obviously. But the thing sitting against the post was also you a few moments ago. If I am not mistaken. Geralt! All eyes now turn to you, witcher. What's going on here, by all the devils? What is that?"

"It's a mimic."

"Mimic, yourself," the creature responded in a guttural voice, wrinkling its nose. "I'm not a mimic, but a doppler. My name is Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte, also known as Penstock. My friends call me Dudu."

"I'll give you 'Dudu,' you damned son of a whore!" Dainty shouted, shaking his fist. "Where are my horses, thief?"

"Gentlemen," the innkeeper prompted, entering with a jug and an armful of mugs. "You promised to stay quiet."

"Oh, beer!" mumbled the halfling. "I have such a thirst, by pestilence. And I'm famished!"

"I, too, would gladly drink something," said Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte.

No-one paid attention to his request.

"What is that thing?" asked the innkeeper, looking at the creature who, at the sight of the beer being served, dragged a long tongue between his drooping lips. "What is that, sirs?"

"A mimic," repeated the witcher, ignoring the monster's grimace. "It goes by a number of names: shifter, double, imitator, pavrat, or even doppler, as he calls himself."

"A shifter!" exclaimed the innkeeper. "Here, in Novigrad? In my establishment? Quickly, the guard must be alerted without delay! And the priests! My word..."

"Easy, easy," Dainty Biberveldt growled, eating Dandelion's soup, which had miraculously not spilled from its bowl. "We'll have plenty of time to turn it over to the authorities. But later. This scoundrel has stolen from me. This is not a matter to entrust to the authorities before I have recovered my due. I know you well, you inhabitants of Novigrad and your judges: I won't recover a dime, and even that would take luck..."

"Have mercy," the doppler moaned desperately. "Don't turn me over to the humans! Don't you know what they do to the ones like me?"

"Of course we know," interrupted the innkeeper, nodding his head. "The priests exorcise captured dopplers: they tie them securely to a wooden stake and trap them in a ball of clay and slag before baking them until the clay hardens and becomes a brick. At least that's what we did once, when monsters were more common."

"A barbaric custom, typical of humans," Dainty said with a grimace, pushing the empty bowl away. "But it might be the proper punishment for the banditry and theft. Come on and talk, scoundrel, where are my horses?"

Answer quickly, or I will rip off your nose with my feet and shove it up your ass! I ask you, where are my horses!"

"I... I sold them," said Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte.

The drooping lips contracted suddenly, taking the shape of a miniature head of cauliflower.

"He sold them? Did you hear that?" the halfling frothed. "He sold my horses!"

"Of course," Dandelion commented. "He had plenty of time. I've seen him here for three days... That means that... By pestilence, Dainty, this means that..."

"It's obvious what that means!" the merchant cried, stamping his hairy feet. "He robbed me on the way, a day's journey from the city, and came here pretending to be me, you understand? And he sold my horses! I'll kill him! I'll snuff him out with my own hands!"

"Tell us what happened, master Biberveldt."

"Geralt of Rivia, I presume? Witcher?"

Geralt acknowledged this with a nod.

"What luck," the halfling went on. "I'm Dainty Biberveldt of the Persicaire's prairie, farmer, rancher and merchant. Call me Dainty, Geralt."

"Tell us what happened, Dainty."

"Well, it was like this: we, my servants and myself, were taking the horses by way of the Devil's Crossing to sell. A day's walk from the city, we set up camp. We fell asleep after drinking a keg of brandy. I awake in the night, my bladder fit to burst. So I get out of the cart and while I'm up, check on the horses in the meadow. A damned fog envelops me. I look: someone's coming toward me. "Who goes there?" I ask. The other doesn't say anything. I come closer, and... I see myself, like a mirror. I think that I shouldn't have had so much to drink, damn that brandy. Then this one..."

because it was him, he hits me in the face! I saw stars and passed out. I wake up in the morning with a blood-covered lump the size of a cucumber on my head. Not a soul to be found. Not a trace of our camp. I wandered for a whole day to find the path. Then I continued my walk, subsisting on little roots and raw mushrooms. He, meanwhile, that revolting Dudulico, whatever his name is, went to Novigrad wearing my appearance to get rid of my horses! I'm going to... As for my servants, the blind fools, I'll give them a hundred blows with a cane on their bare asses for not recognizing their own master and for getting conned like this! Cretins, dunderheads, piss-drunk louts..."

"Don't blame them, Dainty," Geralt interrupted. "They never had a chance to see through it: a mime makes a copy so perfect that it's impossible to distinguish from the original, in this case the victim. You've never heard of mimics?"

"I've heard of them, sure, but I thought they were imaginary."

"They are by no means imaginary. A doppler only needs to know or examine the victim to adapt his own shape immediately and perfectly to the structure of the original. I would point out that this is no illusion, but an extremely fine metamorphosis that imitates even the smallest details. How do mimics manage this? That, we don't know. Sorcerers presume that we are dealing with a process similar to that of lycanthropy, but I think that this is an entirely different mechanism, or something like lycanthropy but with an underlying force a thousand times greater. A werewolf can only take two or perhaps three forms at most, while the mimic can transform infinitely so long as what he copies corresponds more or less to his body mass."

"Body mass?"

"Yes. He can't transform into a colossus. Nor a mouse."

"I see. And what's the chain you tied him with for?"

"The silver is lethal to a werewolf, but only neutralizes, as you can see, a mimic. He sits quietly without changing form thanks to the power of this chain."

The doppler pursed his drooping lips, giving the witcher a sullen look. His troubled eyes had lost the hazel color of the halfling's irises and turned yellow.

"Watch yourself, you son of a bitch," Dainty growled. "When I think it even came down to the Grotto where I myself usually stay. And it persuaded them, the imbeciles, that it was really me!"

Dandelion nodded.

"Dainty," said the troubadour, "it was really you. I've been coming here for three days. It was your appearance and your wording. He thought like you. When the bill came, he was as miserly as you. Maybe even more so."

"On the latter point I don't care in the least," said the halfling, "because in that case maybe I can recover some part of my money. I don't dare touch that thing. Get my purse back from him, Dandelion, and see what it contains. There should be a lot of money if the horse thief sold my animals."

"How many horses did you have, Dainty?"

"Twelve."

"Based on the current price on the world market," the musician continued, inspecting the contents of the purse, "and on the influence that you really hold, then I see enough for perhaps one horse here, and that, old and strung out. In Novigrad, this would be enough to acquire two goats, possibly three."

The merchant was silent. He looked as though he would burst into tears. Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte flattened his nose as low as possible and his lips lower still, making a feeble gurgle.

"In other words," the halfling sighed at last, "it's a creature whose existence I had dismissed as a fairy-tale that has robbed and ruined me. That's what I call bad luck."

"I won't argue with that," the witcher remarked, casting a glance at the doppler that was curling in on itself more and more. "I was also convinced that mimics belonged to a bygone era. Apparently there were once many of them in the forests and on the surrounding plateaus. But their ability to take other forms alarmed the first settlers, who began to hunt them efficiently. Almost all of them were exterminated."

"And it's a good thing," the innkeeper interrupted, spitting: "I swear on the Eternal Fire that I'd prefer dragons or devils, because a dragon is a dragon and a devil a devil. You know what you're dealing with. Werewolves, their metamorphoses and their variations, are

all simply horrifying. It is a demonic process, a fraud, the act of a traitor. Humans have everything to lose from such trickery! I tell you: alert the guard and put the monster to the flame!"

"Geralt," Dandelion said, intrigued by the subject, "I'd be happy to hear the voice of a specialist. These mimics really are menacing and aggressive?"

"They generally use their ability to copy," the witcher replied, "for defense rather than attack. I have never heard of..."

"By the plague," Dainty interrupted, bringing his fist down on the table. "If knocking someone out and robbing them isn't aggressive, then I don't know what is. The matter is simple: I was attacked and robbed of not only the fruits of honest labor, but also of my own self. I demand compensation! I will not accept..."

"We must alert the guard," repeated the innkeeper. "And also the priests! And burn the monster, the non-human!"

"Stop, innkeeper!" the halfling cut in, looking up. "You begin to annoy us with your guards. I note that this non-human has only caused harm to myself. Not to you, until shown otherwise. And, incidentally, you will notice that I am also a non-human."

"Come now, master Biberveldt..." the innkeeper replied, with an embarrassed smile. "What a difference there is between him and you! Your

kind are like humans, of course, while this one is nothing but a monster. I'm surprised, by the way, master witcher, that you stay seated like this without reacting. What is your purpose, one might ask? Isn't it true that you kill monsters?"

"Monsters, indeed," Geralt responded coldly, "but not members of intelligent races."

"Here, master," said the innkeeper "you exaggerate somewhat."

"That's right, Geralt," Dandelion interrupted, "you're pushing it, calling this an 'intelligent race.' Just look at it."

Tellico Lunngrevink Letort indeed did not give the impression of belonging to a sentient race. Fixing the witcher with his troubled yellow eyes, he more closely resembled a puppet made of mud and flour. The sniffles produced by his nose, lying flat on the table, did not make a convincing case for such membership.

"Enough of this meaningless blather!" Dainty Biberveldt cried suddenly. "There is nothing to discuss! All that matters are my horses and my losses! You heard me, you blasted yellow fungus! To whom did you sell my horses? What have you done with the money? Speak now, because I'll kick you and hit you and tear you apart!"

Opening the door, Obstruante stuck her head into the alcove.

"Some guests just arrived at the inn, father," she murmured. "Apprentice builders and some others. I'm serving them, but stop shouting like this, because they're starting to ask what's going on in here."

"By the Eternal Fire!" the innkeeper swore, looking at the collapsed doppler. "If someone comes in and sees it... we're finished. If we don't alert the guard, well... Master witcher! If this is really a shifter, tell this thing to take a more respectable and discreet form. For the moment, at least."

"Well said," Dainty agreed. "Turn him into something else, Geralt."

"Into whom?" the doppler asked then, gurgling. "I can only take the form of someone I can see. Which one of you wants to lend me his appearance?"

"Not me," the innkeeper said quickly.

"Nor me," Dandelion said indignantly. "It wouldn't be good camouflage. The whole world knows me: the sight of two Dandelions seated at the same table would cause a greater sensation than the sight of this naked monster."

"With me, it would be the same," Geralt added, smiling. "That leaves you, Dainty. You're in luck. No offense: you know that humans have difficulty differentiating between

halflings."

The merchant didn't hesitate for long.

"Fine," he said. "So be it. Remove the chain, witcher. Come on, turn yourself into me, 'intelligent race.'"

Freed from the chain, the doppler stretched his pasty limbs, stroked his nose and then studied the halfling. The stretched skin of his face became firmer and took on color. The nose diminished, producing a muffled gurgle. On his bald scalp, curly hair appeared. Dainty widened his eyes. The innkeeper, awed, mutely opened his mouth. Dandelion gasped without interrupting his incessant moan.

The final touch was the change to the color of his eyes.

Dainty Biberveldt the Second gave a rumbling gurgle. He seized the mug belonging to Dainty Biberveldt the First from across the table and brought it greedily to his lips.

"It's impossible, it's impossible," Dandelion repeated in a low voice. "See here: the copy is perfect, it's impossible to differentiate. Everything is there! This time, even the mosquito bites and the stains on the trousers... Truly, the trousers! Geralt, even the sorcerers don't succeed at that! Feel it, that's real wool, not an illusion! Incredible! How does he do it?"

"Nobody knows," the witcher rumbled. "He himself doesn't know. I said that he possesses an ability to completely transform his own matter, but this ability is organic and instinctive..."

"But the trousers... What are the trousers made of? And the vest?"

"It's just his own transformed skin. I don't think that he'd readily agree to take them off. Besides, the skin would immediately lose its woolen properties..."

"Pity," Dainty said, his eyes glinting. "I was just wondering if it was possible for it to transform the matter of that bucket into gold."

Obviously very happy to be the center of attention, the doppler who had become a faithful copy of the halfling took his ease with a broad smile. He adopted a seated position identical to that of Dainty, his hairy feet kicking in the same way.

"You know the subject of dopplers well, Geralt," he said before tipping back his mug, smacking his tongue and burping. "Very well, even."

"By the gods, that's exactly the voice and the mannerisms of Biberveldt," said Dandelion. "Does anyone have a red taffeta ribbon? We must mark it, damn it, because it could all go wrong."

"How is that, Dandelion?" demanded Dainty Biberveldt the First. "There is no way you can confuse me with him! From the first..."

"... glance, there are differences," continued Dainty Biberveldt the Second, stifling a burp. "To confuse us, you would really have to be a horse's ass."

"What did I just say?" Dandelion murmured with admiration. "He thinks and talks like Biberveldt. It is impossible to differentiate..."

"That's a stretch!" The halfling made a face. "A big stretch."

"No," Geralt objected, "it's no stretch. Whether you believe it or not, Dainty, that creature is indeed yourself at the moment. Through means unknown, the doppler also precisely copies the psyche of its victims."

"The psy... what?"

"The characteristics of the mind: character, feeling, thoughts. The soul. This contradicts the claims of the majority of sorcerers and all priests: the soul is also the body."

"You blaspheme..." the innkeeper broke in, breathing unevenly.

"What rubbish," Dainty Biberveldt added forcefully. "Don't joke around, witcher. The properties of the mind, well then: copying someone's nose or trousers is one thing, but the intelligence, that's bullshit. I'll prove it right here. If your flea-bitten doppler copied my business acumen, he would not have sold my horses in Novigrad where the market is weak,

but would have gone to Devil's Crossing, to the horse market, where the prices are decided at auction. There, you do not lose..."

"Of course you lose!" The doppler aped the halfling's pique, imitating his characteristic grumble. "First, the auction prices at Devil's Crossing have been falling, because the merchants decide amongst themselves how much to bid. And a commission must be paid to the organizers."

"You will not teach me commerce, imbecile," Biberveldt raged. "At Devil's Crossing, I would have gotten 90 or even 100 apiece. And you, how much did you get from the rogues in Novigrad?"

"130," replied the doppler.

"You lie, damned porridge-brain!"

"I'm not lying. I took the horses directly to the port, master Dainty, where I found a fur trader from overseas. Furriers don't use oxen to draw their caravans, because the animals are too slow. The furs are light, but valuable. They must therefore travel faster. In Novigrad, there is no market for horses: thus there are no horses either. I was the only one to make an offer. I could therefore name my own price. It's as simple..."

"Don't lecture me, I told you!" Dainty shouted, growing crimson. "Well then, you made some money. But where has it gone now?"

"I invested it," Tellico replied proudly, smoothing a stubborn lock of hair just as Dainty often did. "Money, master Dainty, must always circulate for business to carry on."

"Watch yourself or I'll break your face! What did you use the money from the horses for? Speak!"

"I said: I bought merchandise."

"What merchandise, you damned lunatic?"

"I bought co... cochineal pigment," the doppler stammered, then recited rapidly: "five hundred bushels of cochineal pigment, sixty-two fifths of mimosa bark, fifty-five barrels of rose essence, twenty-three barrels of fish oil, six hundred earthenware bowls and eight hundred pounds of beeswax. Note that the fish oil was a very good price because it was slightly rancid. Ah! I almost forgot: and one hundred cubits of cotton cord."

A very long silence fell.

"Rancid fish oil," Dainty said at last, articulating very slowly and placing emphasis on each word. "Cotton cord, rose essence. I must be dreaming. It's a nightmare. Anything can be bought in Novigrad: the most precious and the most useful items... and this cretin spends my money to acquire this shit. With my appearance! My standing and my reputation as a merchant are ruined. No, it's all too much for me. I can't take it. Give me your sword, Geralt, so I can finally be rid of him."

The door to the alcove opened with a creak.

"Merchant Biberveldt!" called the individual who had just entered. He was so thin that the purple toga he wore seemed to be draped on a coat-hanger; on his head sat a velvet hat shaped something like an overturned chamberpot. "Is the merchant Biberveldt here?"

"Yes," the two halflings replied in unison.

In the instant that followed, one of the two Dainty Biberveldts threw the contents of his mug into the witcher's face, deftly kicked the stool out from under Dandelion and crawled swiftly under the table in the direction of the door, knocking over the individual in the funny hat in the process.

"Fire! Help!" he yelled, falling backward into the common room. "Murder! Call the fire brigade!"

Having wiped the foam from his face, Geralt set off in pursuit of the fugitive, but the other Dainty Biberveldt, who had also rushed to the door, got tangled in his legs after slipping on the sawdust. They fell together in the doorway. Dandelion swore horribly, trying to

extricate himself from under the table.

"Stop, thief!" howled the lanky individual, still on the ground and entangled in the folds of his toga. "Thief! Bandits!"

Geralt trampled the halfling. Finally in the inn's common room, he saw the doppler barrel into the customers and run into the street. The witcher tried to use his momentum to cross this elastic barrier but was halted by the customers who blocked the way. He managed to knock down one of them, black with mud and stinking of beer, but the others, locking their strong shoulders, did not budge an inch. Geralt thrashed, enraged. He heard the sharp crack of thread and leather giving way. Under his arm, he could feel a sudden lack of resistance. The witcher stopped struggling and swore.

"We caught him!" shouted the workers. "We caught the thief! What do we do, chief?"

"Into the quicklime!" the foreman bellowed, lifting his head from the table and trying to orient himself with bleary eyes.

"Guards!" bawled the one dressed in purple, extricating himself from the alcove. "Contempt of court! Guards! You'll end up on the gallows, thief!"

"We have him!" cried the workers. "We have him, sir."

"It's not him," the man in the toga howled in response. "Catch the scoundrel! Chase him!"

"Who?"

"Biberveldt, the hobbit! Catch him, catch him! Lock him up in a dungeon!"

"Just a minute..." Dainty interrupted, stepping out of the alcove. "What are you doing, master Schwann? Don't wipe your mouth with my name. Call off the alarm. It's not necessary."

Schwann grew quiet, watching the halfling warily. Dandelion appeared in the doorway of the alcove, wearing his hat askew and checking the state of his lute. The workers released Geralt at last after having exchanged some words in low voices. Despite his anger, the witcher constrained himself to spitting profusely on the floor.

"Merchant Biberveldt!" Schwann yelled, blinking his myopic eyes. "What is the meaning of this? Attacking a municipal functionary could cost you dearly... Who was that, the hobbit who disappeared?"

"A cousin," Dainty replied promptly. "A distant cousin..."

"Yes, yes..." Dandelion confirmed quickly, feeling that he was in his element at last. "A distant cousin of Biberveldt called Toupet-Biberveldt, the black sheep of the family. As a child, he fell down a well. Happily, the well was dry, but unfortunately, the bucket fell on his head. He's usually harmless. Only the sight of the color purple drives him into a rage. But there is nothing to worry about, because the sight of red hair on a lady's pubis has the power to calm him. That's why he fled to Passionflower, I tell you, master Schwann..."

"Enough, Dandelion," the witcher interrupted abruptly. "Shut up, damn it."

Schwann draped himself in his toga, brushed off the sawdust that clung to it and stuck out his chest, adopting an expression of appropriate severity.

"Yes..." he said. "Look after your loved ones more carefully, merchant Biberveldt, because you should know that you are responsible for their actions. If I file a complaint... But I do not have the time. Biberveldt, the errand that brings me here: in the name of the municipal authorities, I order you to pay the taxes that you owe."

"What?"

"The taxes," the functionary repeated, pinching his lips together in the manner of his superiors. "What's gotten into you? Has your cousin made you lose your head? When one makes a profit, one must pay his taxes or expect to find himself thrown into the deepest dungeon."

"Me?" Dainty bawled. "Me, profit? But I have nothing but losses, for fuck's sake!"

Me..."

"Careful, Biberveldt," the witcher murmured.

Dandelion dealt a furtive kick to his hairy ankle. The halfling coughed.

"Of course," he said, trying to plaster a smile across his chubby face. "Of course, master Schwann. If one does business, one must pay taxes. Good business generates big taxes. And the reverse, I imagine."

"It is not for me to judge the quality of your transactions, master merchant." The official sat at the table and made a wry face; from the folds of his toga, he produced an abacus and a scroll that he unrolled on the table, smoothing it with his sleeve. "My role is to count and collect. Yes... Let's draw up the bill... That will be... hum... Take off two, carry the one... Yes... 1,553 crowns and 20 coppers."

A hoarse sound burst from Dainty's throat. The workers murmured in amazement. Dandelion sighed.

"Well, goodbye, friends," the halfling said at last. "If anyone asks, tell them I'm rotting in the dungeon."

II

"Until noon tomorrow," Dainty whimpered. "Schwann, that son of a bitch, exaggerates. The repulsive old man could have given me an extension. More than 1,500 crowns! Where will I find that kind of money by tomorrow? I am a finished halfling, ruined, doomed to end my life in prison! Let's not sit here, by the plague. I tell you this: that scoundrel the doppler must be caught. We must catch him!"

The three of them were seated on the edge of the marble basin of a dry fountain, situated in the center of a small square surrounded by the homes of bourgeoisie with great wealth but extremely questionable taste. The water in the basin was green and horribly filthy, teeming with small fish that swam amid the refuse. Mouths gaping, they tried to gulp air from the surface, laboriously opening and closing their gills. Dandelion and the halfling were chewing on beignets that the troubadour had stolen from a street vendor.

"If I were you," said the bard, "I would give up the pursuit and start looking for someone who could loan me the money. What will catching the doppler accomplish? You think that Schwann will accept it as the financial equivalent?"

"You're an idiot, Dandelion. By finding the doppler, I'll get my money back."

"What money? Everything your purse contained was used to pay for the damage and grease Schwann's palm. There was no more."

"Dandelion," the halfling said, grimacing. "You might know something about poetry, but as for business, forgive me for saying so, you have an empty skull. You heard the amount of tax that Schwann calculated? Taxes, they are paid on the basis of what? Eh? Of what?"

"Of everything," replied the poet. "Myself, I am taxed for singing. And the fact that I sing to satisfy an internal need makes little difference."

"You really are an idiot, as I said. In business, taxes are paid on profit. On profit, Dandelion! You understand? That scoundrel the doppler stole my identity and organized a particularly lucrative scam! He made a profit! And me, I must pay the tax and also the debts surely racked up by this vagabond! If I don't pay, I'll end up behind bars; they'll publicly clap me in irons and send me to the mines. By the plague!"

"Ah!" Dandelion said cheerfully. "Then you have no other choice, Dainty. You must leave the city on the sly. You know what? I have an idea. We'll hide you under a sheepskin and when you walk through the gate, you'll only have to repeat: 'Baa, baa, I am a sheep.' No-

one will recognize you."

"Dandelion," the halfling replied hotly. "Shut up or I will put you through hell. Geralt?"

"Yes, Dainty."

"Will you help me catch the doppler?"

"Listen," responded the witcher, trying vainly to repair the torn sleeve of his jacket. "We are in Novigrad, a city of thirty thousand inhabitants: humans, dwarves, half-elves, halflings and gnomes, and perhaps twice as many people passing through. How can you find anyone in that mob?"

Dainty swallowed his beignet and then licked his fingers.

"And magic, Geralt? What about your witcher spells, which are the subject of so many stories?"

"The doppler is only magically detectable when he takes his own appearance. Unfortunately, he doesn't walk down the street in that form. And even then, magic wouldn't be any help, because the area is saturated with weak magical signals. Half the houses have magical locks; three quarters of the people wear an amulet for some purpose or another: to protect against thieves, lice, indigestion... The number is infinite."

Dandelion ran his fingers over the body of the lute, plucking the strings.

"With spring the warm smell of rain returns, " he sang. "No, that won't do. With spring comes the smell of the sun... Damn it, no! Definitely not. But then not everything..."

"Stop squawking," the halfling snapped. "You're getting on my nerves."

Dandelion threw the rest of his beignet to the fish and spat into the basin.

"Look," he said, "golden carp. They say these fish grant wishes."

"Those are red," Dainty remarked.

"What's the difference? By the plague, there are three of us, and they grant three wishes. One per person. What do you think, Dainty? Wouldn't you like a fish to pay your taxes?"

"Of course. I would also like for a meteor to fall from the sky and bash in the doppler's head. And then..."

"Stop, stop. We have wishes to make, too. Me, I'd like the fish to whisper the end of my ballad to me. And you, Geralt?"

"Leave me be, Dandelion."

"Don't spoil the mood, witcher. Simply say what you'd like."

The witcher stood.

"I'd like," he murmured, "for the fact that we are being followed to turn out to be a misunderstanding."

Four people dressed in black and wearing leather caps were emerging from an alley and heading straight for the fountain. Dainty swore quietly, seeing them approach.

Four others appeared behind them, from the same alley. These didn't approach. Arranged in a line, they were content to block the exit. They held curious hoops resembling coiled lengths of rope. The witcher examined the area. He rolled his shoulders to adjust the position of the sword on his back. Dandelion gave a moan.

A man of short stature, dressed in a white doublet and a short gray coat, appeared behind the men dressed in black. The gold chain he wore around his neck flashed, in time with his footsteps, with the golden hue of the sun.

"Chapelle," Dandelion groaned. "It's Chapelle..."

The men dressed in black were slowly moving behind them in the direction of the fountain. The witcher moved to draw his sword.

"No, Geralt," Dandelion murmured, pressing close to him. "By the gods, don't draw your weapon. This is the temple guard. If we resist, we'll never get out of Novigrad alive.

Don't touch your sword."

The man in the white doublet approached them with a purposeful stride. The men dressed in black dispersed behind him to surround the basin and fully occupy the terrain. Geralt watched attentively, hunching slightly. The strange circles the men held in their hands were not whips, as he had first thought. They were lamiae.

The man in the white doublet approached.

"Geralt," the bard murmured, "by all the gods, stay calm..."

"I will not allow them to touch me," he growled. "I will not let a single person touch me. Whatsoever. Be careful, Dandelion... When I begin, run for your life. I'll stop them... for awhile..."

Dandelion didn't answer. Having set his lute on his shoulder, he bowed deeply before the man in the white doublet, which was richly embroidered with gold and silver thread in a mosaic of tiny patterns.

"Venerable Chapelle..."

The man called Chapelle stopped and looked them over. Geralt had noticed that his horribly chilly eyes reflected the color of metal. His abnormally sweaty brow had a sickly pallor; blotches of crimson stood out on his cheeks.

"Master Dainty Biberveldt, merchant," he announced. "The talented Master Dandelion. And Geralt of Rivia, representing the ever noble brotherhood of witchers. Is this a reunion between old friends? In our home, in Novigrad?"

No-one answered.

"To compound the misfortune," Chapelle continued, "I must divulge that someone has already reported you."

Dandelion paled slightly. The halfling's teeth chattered. Not to be distracted from his surveillance of the individuals in black wearing leather hats who surrounded the basin, the witcher ignored Chapelle. In most of the countries Geralt knew, manufacture and possession of a barbed lamia, also called a Whip of Mayhe, was strictly prohibited. Novigrad was no exception. Geralt had seen men struck in the face by a lamia. It was impossible afterward to forget the sight.

"The proprietor of the inn The Pike's Grotto" Chapelle continued, "had the impudence to reproach your lordships for associating with a demon, a monster known generally as a shifter or mimic."

No-one responded. Chapelle crossed his arms over his chest and stared at them coldly.

"I felt compelled to warn you that this denunciation had been made. I also inform you that the innkeeper in question has been imprisoned in a dungeon. We suspect him of inventing the story under the influence of beer or liquor. The things these people will invent. To begin with, shifters don't exist. They're an invention of credulous yokels."

No-one made any comment.

"Furthermore, no shifter could approach a witcher," Chapelle continued, smiling, "without being killed on the spot. Isn't that right?"

"The accusation of the innkeeper would be in these circumstances absolutely absurd if a certain detail did not nevertheless leave some doubt."

Chapelle shook his head in the imposing silence. The witcher heard the slow exhalation of the air that Dainty had previously sucked deep into his lungs.

"Yes, a certain detail is very important," Chapelle repeated. "We are indeed dealing with an act of heresy and sacrilegious blasphemy. It is obvious that no shifter, I say none, and no monster for that matter, would be able to approach the walls of Novigrad by reason of the presence of its nineteen Temples of Eternal Fire, whose sacred virtue protects the city. Anyone who claims to have seen a shifter in The Pike's Grotto, situated a stone's throw from the main altar of Eternal Fire, is a sacrilegious heretic who must repudiate his words. If it

happens that he refuses to repudiate them, I will be obliged to assist in the form of forces and means that remain, believe me, at my disposal in my jails. You see, there is no need to worry."

The expressions on the faces of Dandelion and the halfling proved beyond doubt that they were of a different opinion.

"There is absolutely no need to worry," Chapelle repeated. "Your lordships may leave Novigrad without interference. I will not keep you, but I would insist that your lordships do not spread the imaginary allegations of the innkeeper and do not comment loudly on these events. We, humble servants of the Church, must consider stories questioning the power of the Eternal Fire to be heresy, with all the attending consequences. The religious convictions of your lordships, which I respect for what they are, do not enter into this. Simply be aware, and do what you will. I am tolerant so long as one respects the Eternal Fire and does not blaspheme against it. He who dares to blaspheme, I will condemn to burn, that is all. In Novigrad, all are equal before the law. The law is the same for all: anyone who blasphemes against the Eternal Fire perishes in the flames and sees his assets

confiscated. But enough talk about all that. I say again: you can go through the gates of Novigrad unimpeded. It would be best..."

Chapelle smiled slightly, giving the impression of a malicious grimace: he puffed out his cheeks, looking around the small square. Witnessing the scene, the few passersby quickened their step and quickly looked away.

"... best," Chapelle finally said, "best to leave immediately, without delay. It is obvious that, in the case of my lord the merchant Biberveldt, the absence of delay signifies 'without delay after meeting his fiscal obligations.' I thank you, my lords, for the time that you have kindly granted me."

Turning discreetly to the others, Dainty silently mouthed a word. The witcher had no doubt that the unspoken word could only be 'bastard.' Dandelion bowed his head, smiling stupidly.

"Master witcher," Chapelle said suddenly. "With your permission, I would have a private word with you."

Geralt approached. Chapelle reached his hand out slightly. If he touches my elbow, I hit him, thought the witcher. / hit him no matter the consequences.

Chapelle didn't touch Geralt's elbow.

"Master witcher," he said in a low voice, turning his back to the others, "I know that certain cities, in contrast to Novigrad, are deprived of the divine protection of the Eternal Fire. Suppose then that a creature like a shifter operated in one of these cities. Tell me, out of curiosity, how much you would charge to capture such a creature alive."

"I do not offer my services in populated cities," the witcher replied, shrugging. "A third party could suffer."

"You are concerned, then, with the fortunes of others?"

"Well yes, because I am in general responsible for their fate. This cannot be without consequences."

"I understand, but should the degree of deference to third parties not be inversely proportional to the expected remuneration?"

"No, it should not."

"I don't care for your tone, witcher. But no matter, I understand what you suggest by that tone. You suggest that you do not intend to undertake the... what I could ask you to do, regardless of the amount of your payment. And what about the type of payment?"

"I don't understand."

"But yes, of course you do."

"No, truly."

"What I say is purely theoretical," Chapelle continued quietly, calmly, without anger or menace in his voice. "Would it be possible if the recompense for your service was the guarantee that your friends and yourself would leave this... theoretical city alive? What do you think?"

"This question," the witcher replied, smiling unpleasantly, "is not one that it is possible to answer theoretically. The situation you describe, venerable Chapelle, must be realized in practice. I am absolutely not in a hurry, but if need be... If there is no other way... I am ready to put that scenario to the test."

"Ah! Perhaps you're right," Chapelle responded dispassionately. "We theorize too much and I see that, in terms of practice, you do not intend to cooperate. Perhaps it is better that way. I nurture the hope, in any case, that this will not be a source of conflict between us."

"I too," Geralt said, "nurture that hope."

"That hope continues to burn within us, Geralt of Rivia. Do you know the Eternal Fire? A flame that never dies? The symbol of our fortitude? Our path through the darkness? The Eternal Fire, Geralt, is hope. For all, without exception. Because if something is given in part... to you, to me, to

others... that thing is simply called hope. Remember this. It was a pleasure to meet you, witcher."

Geralt bowed stiffly and kept silent. Chapelle looked at him for a moment, then turned his back and crossed the square without a glance at his escort. The men armed with lamiae followed behind in an orderly formation.

"Oh, my mother," Dandelion whimpered timidly, watching them leave. "We were lucky. As long as it's over, as long as they're finished with us for now."

"Calm yourself," said the witcher, "and stop whining. Nothing happened, as you can see."

"Do you know who that was, Geralt?"

"No."

"That was Chapelle, the officer of security. Novigrad's secret service is dependent on the Church. Chapelle isn't a priest, but the highest official of the hierarchy, the most powerful and dangerous man in the city. Everyone, even the Council and the guilds, quake in their boots before him: he's a scoundrel of the first order, Geralt, drunk on power like a spider on blood. People whisper about his exploits: disappearances that leave no trace, false accusations, torture, masked assassins, terror, blackmail, ordinary theft, duress, scams and plots. By the gods, you have have the makings of a beautiful story, Biberveldt."

"Leave me alone, Dandelion," Dainty said. "You have nothing to fear: no-one harms a hair on the head of a troubadour. For reasons that escape me, you are still untouchable."

"An untouchable poet," Dandelion groaned, still pale, "may also fall under the wheels of a runaway cart, be poisoned by eating fish or accidentally drown in a ditch. Such scenarios are Chapelle's specialty. He agreed to talk with us, that's already an extraordinary fact. One thing is certain: he would never have done so without a good reason. He's up to something. You'll see: he'll fall upon us at the first opportunity, clap us in irons and torture us with impunity. Nothing is more normal here!"

"There is a lot of truth in what he says," the halfling said to Geralt. "We must be wary of the scoundrel who owns this land. They say he's sick, that his blood is spoiled. Everyone is waiting for him to kick the bucket."

"Shut up, Biberveldt," Dandelion hissed timidly, looking around them. "Someone could hear. See how everyone's watching. Break camp, I tell you. I advise you to reflect seriously on what Chapelle suggested regarding the doppler. I, for example, have never seen a doppler in my life. If necessary, I am prepared to swear on the Eternal Fire."

"Look!" the halfling said suddenly. "Someone's coming now!"

"Run!" Dandelion cried.

"Calm down, calm down," Dainty said, smiling broadly and smoothing his stubborn hair. "I know him. It's Muscadin, a local merchant, treasurer of the guild. We've done business together. Look at his face! As if he'd shit his pants. Hey, Muscadin, are you looking forme?"

"I swear on the Eternal Fire," Muscadin said slowly, breathless, dragging off his fox-cap and wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "I was sure they would drag you to the tower. It's a miracle. I'm amazed..."

The halfling maliciously cut Muscadin's words short: "It is kind of you to be amazed... Even kinder of you to explain why."

"Don't play the fool, Biberveldt," Muscadin responded anxiously. "Everyone is talking about it. The hierarchy has seen it. Chapelle too. The whole town knows what a deal you got on the cochineal, and with what intelligence and cunning you profited from the events in Poviss."

"What are you talking about, Muscadin?"

"By the gods, Dainty, would you stop this gloating like the bird of proverb who thinks his nest the best? Did you not buy the cochineal at half price, for 5.20 a bushel? You did. Taking advantage of low demand, you paid with a promissory note. You didn't pay a single cent in cash for the transaction. And what happened? Within the day, you turned over the merchandise for a

price four times higher than what you originally paid. Will you have the gall to claim that this was nothing but coincidence or luck, and that in buying the cochineal, you knew nothing of the upheavals taking place in Poviss?"

"What? What are you saying?"

"There has been turmoil in Poviss!" Muscadin shouted. "A... there... what's the word: a 'rellavotion.' King Rhyd was deposed. The Thyssenides clan governs now! Rhyd's court, nobility, and army wore blue. The local weavers only bought indigo. But the Thyssenides wear scarlet. The price of indigo fell and cochineal rose! Then we learned that it was you, Biberveldt, who had on hand the only store of cochineal available. Ha!"

Dainty kept quiet, frowning.

"Biberveldt the cunning, that's the least we can call you," Muscadin continued. "And without a word to anyone, even your friends... If you had told me, we would all be able to profit. We could even have found a common agency. But you preferred to go it alone. That's your choice. In any case, no longer count on me. By the Eternal Fire, the halflings are nothing but egotistical scoundrels and dogs. Vimme Vivaldi has never endorsed a promissory note for me, and for you? Without hesitation. Rotten, every one of you damned 'non-humans,' accursed halflings and dwarves! Plague take you!"

Muscadin spat and turned on his heel. Lost in thought, Dainty scratched his head. His cowlick rose.

"Something begins to grow clearer, my lads," he said finally. "I know what we should do. Let's go to the bank. If anyone can get us through all this, it's my good banker, Vimme Vivaldi."

III

"I imagined banks differently," Dandelion murmured, examining the room. "Where do they keep the money, Geralt?"

"Devil only knows," the witcher responded in a low voice, trying to hide the torn sleeve of his jacket. "Maybe in the basement?"

"No, I looked: there's no basement here."

"Must be in the attic."

"Please come into my office, gentlemen," announced Vimme Vivaldi.

Seated at large tables, young men and dwarves of indeterminate age were busy aligning rows of numbers and letters on sheets of parchment. All, without exception, bowed their heads and stuck out their tongues slightly. The witcher thought that the task must be terribly tedious. It seemed nonetheless to absorb the workers. In one corner, an old man who looked like a beggar was seated on a stool, sharpening pencils. His pace remained slow.

The banker cautiously closed the door to his office. He smoothed his long beard, which was well-maintained despite ink stains here and there, then adjusted the jacket that was buttoned with difficulty over his belly.

"You know, master Dandelion," he said, sitting behind an enormous mahogany table that groaned under the weight of heaped scrolls, "I imagined you very differently. I've heard and know your songs: of Queen Vanda, drowned in the Cula river, because no-one would have her. And the kingfisher who dove to the bottom of a latrine..."

"I am not the author," Dandelion responded, red with anger. "I've never written anything of the sort!"

"Oh. Excuse me."

"If we could perhaps move on to serious matters," Dainty interrupted. "Time is wasting while you discuss unnecessary subjects. I have serious problems, Vimme."

"I was afraid of that," the dwarf responded, shaking his head. "Remember that I warned you, Biberveldt. I told you three days ago not to invest money

in that rancid fish oil. What difference does it make that the price was low? The nominal price is not important. What is important is the resale profit. The same for the rose essence and the wax, and the damned cotton cord. What possessed you, Dainty, to buy such shit? In cash, no less, instead of paying reasonably with a letter of credit or exchange! I told you, the cost of storage in Novigrad is expensive. In a span of two weeks it will exceed three times the value of the goods. And you..."

"Yes," the halfling moaned quietly. "Tell me, Vivaldi. I what?"

"You, you assured me that there was no risk, that you'd sell it all within twenty-four hours. Today you come back to see me with your tail between your legs to admit you're having trouble. You haven't sold any of it, have you? And the storage price went up, eh? Ah, that's no good, it's no good! Do I need to get you out of this now, Dainty? If at least you had insured your merchandise, I would gladly send one of my scribes to discreetly burn your warehouse. No, my friend, the only thing we can do is take things philosophically and say, 'it all went to shit.' That's commerce: win one day, lose the next. In the long run, what's the importance of the money spent to buy fish oil, string, and rose essence? Not much. Let's speak instead of more serious matters. Tell me if I should sell the mimosa bark, because the offers are beginning to stabilize at five and five sixths."

"Huh?"

"Are you deaf?" the banker asked, frowning. "The latest offer is equivalent to five and five sixths. I hope that you came back to get rid of it, because you will not get seven, Dainty."

"Came back?"

Vivaldi smoothed his beard to dislodge the breadcrumbs that were clinging to it.

"You came in an hour ago," he replied calmly, "with the order to hold until seven. To sell at seven times the initial purchase price, this would be 2 crowns and 45 coppers per pound. It's too expensive, Dainty, even in such a

favorable market. The tanners have already agreed amongst themselves to freeze the price. I'd bet my head that..."

"The merchant Sulimir offers 2.15 crowns!" shouted a strident voice.

"Six and a sixth," Vivaldi calculated swiftly. "What shall we do, Dainty?"

"Sell!" the halfling cried. "Six times the purchase price and you still hesitate, by the

plague?"

A second creature, wearing a yellow hat and covered in an overcoat that resembled an old sack, arrived in turn in the office.

"The merchant Biberveldt recommends not to sell before seven!" he yelled, before wiping his nose with his sleeve and immediately departing.

"Ah, ah!" the dwarf said eventually, after a long delay. "A Biberveldt orders me to sell, but another Biberveldt, on the contrary, asks me to wait. Interesting. What shall we do, Dainty? Will you settle the matter before a third Biberveldt orders us aboard a galley to be transported to the land of dog-headed men, eh?"

"What is that?" asked Dandelion, indicating the thing dressed in a green hat that was standing motionless in the doorway. "What is it, by the plague?"

"A young gnome," Geralt replied.

"It must be," Vivaldi confirmed drily. "It's not an old troll. What it is is of no importance. Come, Dainty, I'm listening."

"Vimme," the halfling said, "I implore you: don't ask questions. Something terrible has happened. Know and acknowledge that I, Dainty Biberveldt, honest merchant of the Persicaire prairie, don't have the slightest idea what is going on here. Tell me every detail: everything that's happened over the past three days. I beg you, Vimme."

"Interesting," said the dwarf. "I understand that what with the commissions I collect, I must respect the wishes of my clients. Listen, then. You appeared in my bank three days ago, completely out of breath. You made a deposit of 1,000 crowns and requested a promissory note of 2,520 payable to the bearer. I gave my endorsement."

"Without collateral?"

"Without, because I like you, Dainty."

"Tell the rest, Vimme."

"The next morning, you rushed in and insisted, making a ruckus and stamping your feet, that I open a line of credit in the Vizima branch of my bank for the substantial amount of 3,500 crowns. The beneficiary was to be, if I recall correctly, a certain Ther Lukokian, known as Big-Nose. I opened this credit."

"Without collateral," the halfling repeated, hope rising in his voice.

"My fondness for you, Biberveldt," the banker sighed, "ends at 3,000 crowns. I required a written statement stipulating that in the case of insolvency, the mill will belong to me."

"What mill?"

"The mill of your father-in-law, Arno Hardbotomm of the Persicares prairie."

"I'm never going home," Dainty said mournfully, adding decisively: "I'll take out a loan to buy a ship and become a pirate."

Vimme Vivaldi scratched his ear, watching him suspiciously.

"Hey!" he said. "You recovered the letter and tore it up a while ago. You're solvent. Nothing surprising about that, with such earnings..."

"Earnings?"

"Indeed, I forgot," grumbled the dwarf, "that I'm expected to be surprised by nothing. You came out far ahead with the cochineal, Biberveldt, because you see, the upheaval that took place in Poviss..."

"I know that already," the halfling interrupted. "Indigo fell and cochineal rose. And I got some money. Is that right, Vimme?"

"That's the truth. You have an account with me for 6,346 crowns and 80 coppers. Net, after subtracting my commission and the amount of tax."

"You paid the tax for me?"

"Shouldn't I have?" Vivaldi asked, surprised. "When you came in an hour ago, you

settled up neatly. One of my clerks already brought the sum to the town hall. About 1,500, because the sale of the horses is of course included."

The office door burst open with a bang to admit something wearing an extremely dirty hat.

"2.30 crowns!" he shouted. "The merchant Hazelquist!"

"Don't sell!" Dainty cried. "Wait for a better price! Both of you, go back to the market at once!"

The two gnomes greedily seized the copper coins tossed to them by the dwarf and disappeared.

"Yes... Where was I, then?" Vivaldi wondered for a moment, toying with the abnormally large amethyst crystal that served as his paperweight. "Ah yes... I was up to the cochineal bought with my promissory note. The letter of credit that I mentioned earlier, you used to buy a large quantity of mimosa bark. You bought a lot, but at a good price: 35 coppers a pound from Zangwebar's broker, that Big-Nose or Snout. The galley docked at the port yesterday. That's where it all started."

"I can imagine," Dainty groaned.

"What is mimosa bark good for?" Dandelion couldn't help but ask.

"Nothing," the halfling groaned sadly. "Unfortunately."

"Mimosa bark, master poet," the dwarf explained, "is a tanning substance used in the manufacture of leather."

"Someone was stupid enough," Dainty interrupted, "to buy mimosa bark from overseas when one can acquire it for next to nothing from Temerian oak."

"That's just where the vampire is buried," said Vivaldi, "because the Temerian druids threatened to set a plague of rats and locusts over the land if the destruction of oak trees is not stopped immediately. The dryads support the druids. It must be said that the Temerian king has always had a certain weakness for dryads. In short: a complete embargo on Temerian oak came into effect yesterday. The price of mimosa is climbing. You had the benefit of good information, Dainty."

Outside the office door there came the sound of footsteps. The thing wearing a green hat burst breathlessly into the office:

"The venerable merchant Sulimir..." the gnome managed to say, "orders me to repeat that the merchant Biberveldt, the halfling, is nothing but a savage hairy-eared swine, a speculator and a swindler, and that he, Sulimir, wishes for Biberveldt to contract scabies. He offers 2.45 crowns. This is his final offer."

"Sell," the halfling concluded. "Go, little one, run and confirm. Calculate, Vimme."

Vivaldi grabbed a stack of parchment and produced a dwarven abacus, a veritable marvel. Unlike those used by humans, the dwarven abacus was shaped like a latticed pyramid. Vivaldi's was crafted from golden filaments upon which small uniform prisms cut from rubies, emeralds, onyx and black agate moved. The dwarf deftly manipulated the jewels at the top, bottom, and sides with his stout fingers.

"This will be... hum... hum... Less cost and my commission... Minus tax... Yes... 15,622 crowns and 25 coppers. Not bad."

"If I've calculated correctly," Dainty Biberveldt said slowly, "that will make a net total of... I should have..."

"Precisely 21,969 crowns and 5 coppers. Not bad."

"Not bad?" Dandelion yelped. "Not bad? With that kind of sum, you could buy a whole village or a small castle! Never in my life have I seen that kind of money!"

"Nor have I," said the halfling. "But let's not get carried away, Dandelion. No-one here has seen that money and we may never even see the color of it."

"How is that, Biberveldt?" the dwarf said, scowling. "Where do you get such sorry

thoughts? Sulimir will pay in cash or with a letter of exchange. Sulimir's money is good. What's wrong, then? You're worried about the losses from the purchase of your stinking fish oil and wax? With such profits, you can easily cover those losses..."

"It's not that."

"Then what?"

Dainty bowed his curly head and cleared his throat.

"Vimme," he said, staring at the ground. "Chapelle is sniffing around."

The banker clucked his tongue.

"It's not right," he said, "but it's not surprising. You see, Biberveldt, the commercial information that you used for your transactions also has political implications. No-one suspected that these things would happen in Poviss and Temeria. Not even Chapelle, and Chapelle likes to be the first to know. Now, you can imagine that he's racking his brains to discover how

you had access to this information. I think that he must already know. As do I."

"Interesting."

Vivaldi glanced at Dandelion and Geralt, wrinkling his nose.

"Interesting? What is interesting are your associates, Dainty," he said. "A troubadour, a witcher and a merchant. My congratulations. Master Dandelion travels everywhere: he frequents royal courts and no doubt knows how to keep his ears open. The witcher? A bodyguard? A scarecrow to keep away the debtors?"

"Your conclusions are too hasty, master Vivaldi," Geralt replied coldly. "We are not associates."

"And I," Dandelion continued, flushing, "do not eavesdrop. I'm a poet, not a spy!"

"One hears things," the dwarf said, grinning. "Many things, master Dandelion."

"Lies!" the troubadour shouted. "It's not true!"

"All right, all right, I believe you. Only, I don't know if Chapelle will believe you. But who knows, perhaps we are making a lot of noise over nothing. I will tell you, Biberveldt, that Chapelle has changed a great deal since his attack of apoplexy. Perhaps the fear of death crept into his heart and forced him to ask questions? This is not the same Chapelle. He has become friendly, sympathetic, calm and... even honest, in a way."

"What are you telling me?" said the halfling. "Chapelle... honest? Friendly? It's not possible."

"I'm telling you the truth," Vivaldi retorted. "What's more, the Church actually faces another problem in the Eternal Fire."

"How is that?"

"The Eternal Fire must burn everywhere, as they say. Altars devoted to it must be erected throughout the land. Many altars. Don't ask for details, Dainty: I am not a follower of human beliefs. But I know that all the priests, including Chapelle, are concerned only with altars and fire. Grand preparations are in motion. Taxes will increase, for sure."

"My word," said Dainty. "Small consolation, but..."

The office door opened again to reveal the thing in a green hat and rabbit fur garment that the witcher already knew.

"The merchant Biberveldt," he reported, "requests the purchase of bowls. The price is secondary."

"Perfect," the halfling said with a smile, which more resembled the distorted face of an enraged wildcat. "Then buy lots of bowls. The will of master Biberveldt must be obeyed. What else should we buy? Cabbage? Juniper oil? Iron stoves?"

"And," the merchant produced something from his fur coat, "the merchant Biberveldt requests 30 crowns in cash to pay for a jug of wine, a meal and beer to drink. Three scoundrels have stolen his purse at The Pike's Grotto."

"Ah! Three scoundrels," Dainty repeated, emphasizing each word. "My word, this

city is teeming with scoundrels. And where is the venerable merchant Biberveldt right now, if I may ask?"

"Where could he be? At the west bazaar, of course," the thing replied with a sniff.

"Vimme," Dainty said in a dire tone. "Don't ask any questions. Find me a very heavy and solid cane from somewhere. I'm going to the west bazaar, but I can't go without that cane. There are too many scoundrels and thieves over there."

"A cane, you say? That can be arranged. But something continues to nag at me, Dainty. I will not ask any questions. I will not ask, but I will only guess, and you will confirm or deny my suppositions, all right?"

"Guess away."

"That rancid fish oil, the rose essence, the wax and the bowls, the damned cotton cord, it's nothing but a ploy to divert the competition's attention from the cochineal pigment and the mimosa and confuse the market, isn't it, Dainty?"

The office door opened to admit something without a hat.

"Oxyria reports: everything is ready!" it pealed loudly. "He asks if we can pour!"

"Pour!" bawled the halfling. "Pour immediately!"

"By old Rhundurin's beard," exclaimed Vimme Vivaldi, after the gnome had closed the door. "I don't understand! What's going on here? Pour what? Pour it into what?"

"I have no idea," Dainty admitted, "but business must go on."

IV

Sneaking with difficulty through the crowd, Geralt headed directly toward a stall laden with copper dishes, pots and pans reflecting the red light of the sun at the end of the day. Behind the stall stood a dwarf with a red beard, dressed in an olive-green hood and heavy sealskin boots. On the dwarf's face there was a certain surliness: he gave the impression that he could at any moment spit on the customer busy browsing the merchandise. The customer drowned the dwarf in a flood of incoherent words, waving her bust and shaking her golden curls.

The customer was none other than Vespula, whom Geralt already knew from his role in the bombardment. Without waiting to be recognized, the witcher melted back into the crowd.

The west bazaar hummed with energy: crossing such a crowd resembled nothing so much as a stroll through hawthorn bushes. The sleeves and pant legs were continuously, at any given moment, being tugged: by children who had been lost by their mothers when they went into tents to drag out husbands too tempted by alcohol and refreshment; spies from the guard tower; traveling salesmen offering caps of invisibility, aphrodisiacs, and erotic scenes carved in cedar wood. Geralt soon stopped smiling to swear and elbow his way through.

He heard the sound of a lute, followed by a rippling laugh in a familiar timbre. These sounds were coming from a stall as colorful as a storybook, adorned with the sign "Miracles, amulets and fishing bait."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're extremely pretty?" Dandelion called, perched on the counter and cheerfully swinging his dangling legs. "No? But that's impossible! But this is a city of the blind! Come, good people! Who wants to hear a love song? Whosoever wants to be moved and spiritually enriched has only to toss a coin into my hat. What is that you threw me, asshole? Those copper coins, you can keep for the beggars. Don't insult an artist with copper! I may eventually forgive you, but art never will!"

"Dandelion," Geralt said, approaching. "I thought we separated to find the doppler,

but I find you organizing a concert. You're not ashamed to sing in the market like an old beggar?"

"Ashamed?" the bard echoed, shocked. "What's important is that one sings, not where one sings. Besides, I'm hungry. The stall's proprietor promised me lunch. As for the doppler, look for it yourself. Me, I'm not made for pursuit, for fighting and settling scores. I'm a poet."

"You'd be better off not drawing attention to yourself, poet, because your girlfriend is in the area. You could be in trouble."

"My girlfriend?" Dandelion groaned nervously. "Which one? I have several."

Brandishing a copper pan, Vespula forged a path through the crowd with the velocity of a charging aurochs. Dandelion tumbled from the stall to make his escape, hopping nimbly over the baskets of carrots. Vespula turned to the witcher, her nostrils flaring with fury. Geralt flattened himself against the rigid wall of the storefront behind him.

"Geralt!" Dainty Biberveldt cried from the churning crowd, blundering into Vespula. "Quickly, quickly! I saw it! Over there, he ran away!"

"I'll find you, you degenerate!" shouted Vespula, regaining her balance. "I will settle the score with the whole herd of swine! What a group you are! A crook, a tattered vagabond and a hairy-footed midget! You won't soon forget me!"

"Over here, Geralt!" Dainty hollered, bowling over a group of students engaged in a shell game in his path. "There, he slipped between the carts! Block the way to the left! Hurry!"

They hastened in pursuit, surrounded by the curses of the customers and merchants they jostled. Geralt miraculously managed to evade a kid who got tangled in his legs. He bounded over him, but hurtled into two barrels of herring. The fishmonger, furious, flung at his back the live eel whose qualities he had been praising to his customers.

They spotted the doppler, who was trying to hide in a sheep pen.

"The other side!" Dainty shouted. "Get the other side, Geralt!"

The doppler, still visible in his green vest, dashed along the side of the fence like an arrow. It was obvious that he had not transformed so that he could continue to take advantage of the halfling's agility, which no-one could match. Except, of course, another halfling. Or a witcher.

Geralt saw the doppler suddenly change direction, raising a cloud of dust, and slip through a hole in the fence erected around the large tent, home to slaughterhouses and butchers. Dainty spotted it too. He hopped the fence and found himself trapped in the middle of a herd of bleating sheep. He lost time. Geralt veered and threw himself on the doppler's trail between the boards of the fence. He heard then the crackle of a tearing garment. Under his second arm, the jacket became very loose.

The witcher stopped dead to swear and spit. And swear again.

Dainty ran after the doppler toward the tent. Cries, the sound of blows, profanity and a frightful din could be heard within.

The witcher swore a third time with particular vulgarity. He gritted his teeth, raising his right hand and aiming the Aard sign directly toward the tent. It swelled like a sail in a tempest. From within came an inhuman howling, the sound of hooves and bellowing oxen. The tent collapsed.

The doppler managed to crawl out from under the canvas to flee to the side of a smaller tent, most likely serving as the cold room. Geralt turned his hand instinctively toward the fugitive and touched the Sign to his back. The doppler collapsed to the ground as if struck by lightning, but recovered immediately, reaching the side of the tent in a few bounds and disappearing, with the witcher always on his heels.

Under the tent, it reeked of meat. The darkness was oppressive.

Tellico Lunngrvink Letort was standing there, motionless and out of breath, clinging

to a pig carcass suspended from a pole. The tent had no other exit; the canvas was solidly and tightly secured to the ground.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, mimic," Geralt said coldly.

The doppler's breath was loud and heavy.

"Leave me alone," he managed at last. "Why are you chasing me, witcher?"

"Tellico," Geralt replied, "you ask some stupid questions. To come into possession of Biberveldt's horses and appearance, you knocked him out and left him flat broke. You continue to profit from his personality and you're surprised by the trouble it brings you? Devil only knows what you're planning, but I intend to oppose it one way or another. I don't want to kill you or hand you over to the authorities. You must leave this city. I will be particularly vigilant."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I'm the one who'll leave, with a wheelbarrow and a sack."

The doppler swelled suddenly, then thinned just as suddenly and began to grow. His curly chestnut hair blanched and lengthened to reach his shoulders. The halfling's green vest shone like oil and became a black leather. Silver studs appeared on the shoulders and the sleeves. His chubby and ruddy face tapered and grew pale.

Above his right shoulder appeared the hilt of a sword.

"Don't come any closer," called the second witcher, snorting and smiling.

"Don't come any closer, Geralt. I won't allow you to touch me."

What a horrible smile, thought Geralt, wanting to seize his sword. / really have a dreadful mouth. My eyes blink appallingly. Is that really the spitting image of me? By the plague.

At the same moment, the doppler's hand and the witcher's touched the hilts of their respective weapons. The two swords were drawn from their sheaths. Both witchers simultaneously executed two small, quick steps: the first

forward, the second to the side. Both swung their swords with a hiss like a propeller.

They froze in that position.

"You can't defeat me," growled the doppler, "because I've become you, Geralt."

"You're mistaken, Tellico," the witcher replied in a low voice. "Throw down your sword and take Biberveldt's form again. Otherwise, you'll regret it. I promise you."

"I'm you," the doppler repeated. "You will never have the advantage over me. You can't defeat me, because I'm you!"

"You have no idea what it means to be me, mimic."

Tellico lowered the arm that was holding his sword.

"I am you," he repeated.

"No," the witcher replied. "You know why? Because you're a nice little doppler. A doppler who could have killed Biberveldt and buried his body in the weeds, ensuring that he would never be unmasked, not even by the halfling's wife, the famous Gardenia Biberveldt. But you didn't kill him, Tellico, because that's not in your nature. You are indeed nothing but a nice little doppler whose friends nicknamed him Dudu. Whatever appearance you borrow, you always remain the same. You only know how to copy what is good in us, because the parts that are bad, you don't understand. That is what you are, doppler."

Tellico backed up until his back was flattened against the canvas side of the tent.

"That's why you're going to turn back into Biberveldt and offer your paws for me to bind. You're not capable of resisting me, because there is part of me that you weren't able to copy. You know that very well, Dudu. For a moment you had access to my thoughts."

"You're right, Geralt," he said indistinctly, because his lips were changing shape. "I had access to your thoughts. For a short time, it's true, but it was enough. Do you know what I'll do now?"

The witcher's leather jacket took on a bluebonnet luster. The doppler smiled, adjusted his olive-colored hat adorned with an egret's plume and hung his lute on his shoulder. The lute that, just a moment before, had been a sword.

"I'll tell you what I'll do now, witcher," he said, laughing Dandelion's loud and rippling laugh. "I'll be on my way and lose myself in the crowd, where I'll discreetly transform into someone else, even a beggar. I'd rather be a beggar in Novigrad than a doppler in the barren wilderness. Novigrad owes me a debt, Geralt. The construction of this city destroyed the environment where we could live in our natural surroundings. We were exterminated, hunted like mad dogs. I am one of the few who survived. Once, when wolves attacked me, I transformed into a wolf and ran with the pack for weeks. In this way I survived. I do the same thing today, because I do not want to wander in the woods and spend the winter under tree stumps; I no longer want to feel constant hunger; I no longer want to serve without respite as an archery target. Here, in Novigrad, it's warm, there's food, one can work for a living and people very rarely hunt each other with bows. Novigrad offers me a pack of wolves. I join it to survive, you understand?"

Geralt acknowledged this with a nod of his head.

"You've reached an accord with the dwarves, the halflings, the gnomes and elves; even," he continued, his lips stretching into Dandelion's insolent smile, "a modest degree of integration. What makes me worse than them? Why am I refused the right? What must I do to live in this city? Transform myself into a doe-eyed elf, with long legs and silken hair? Huh? How is an elf better than me? At the sight of an elf, you stare at her legs, but me, when you look at me, you want to vomit? You order me to clear off, you want to banish me, but I'll survive. I know how. In the wolf pack, I ran, howled and bit my confederates for a female's favors. As an inhabitant of Novigrad, I'll trade, weave wicker baskets, beg or steal. As part of your society, I'll do the ordinary things that people do in your society. Who knows, perhaps I'll be able to get married?"

The witcher remained silent.

"As I said," Tellico continued calmly, "I'm going. And you, Geralt, you won't even try to stop me. You won't lift even a single finger, because I pierced your thoughts for an instant, Geralt - including those whose existence you refuse to admit, those that you hide from yourself. To stop me, you would have to kill me, but the idea of cutting me down in cold blood fills you with horror. Am I wrong?"

The witcher still did not answer.

Tellico adjusted the strap of his lute again and started toward the exit after turning his back on Geralt. He walked with a resolute gait, but the witcher noticed that his neck stiffened and his shoulders hunched, waiting for the hiss of the blade. Geralt sheathed his sword. The doppler stopped midway and turned to look at him.

"Goodbye, Geralt," he said. "Thank you."

"Goodbye, Dudu," the witcher replied. "Good luck."

The doppler turned in the direction of the crowded bazaar with the same confident, lighthearted and swinging gait as Dandelion. Just like the troubadour, he raised his right hand and waved energetically, smiling broadly at the nearby girls. Geralt followed slowly in his steps. Slowly.

Tellico grasped his lute, walking and, having slowed his pace, played two chords, a prelude to strumming out a melody already known to Geralt. Turning, he sang lightly, like Dandelion:

When the spring comes along with the rain

the sun will warm us both.

That's the way it must be, for we burn

with fire eternal like hope.

"Repeat that for Dandelion if you can remember it," he called. "This ballad should be titled The Eternal Fire. Goodbye, witcher!"

"Hey!" he heard suddenly. "Lousy crook!"

Startled, Tellico turned. Vespula appeared from behind a stall, her bust rising and falling violently, and gave him an ominous look.

"Ogling girls, you traitor?" she hissed, moving with increasing agitation. "Serenading them, scoundrel?"

Tellico doffed his cap and bowed, giving her a broad smile, just as Dandelion would.

"Vespula, my dear," he said attentively, "how happy I am to see you. Forgive me, my sweet. I'm in your debt..."

"You are... you are..." she interrupted loudly. "And as you're in my debt, it's time to pay! Here!"

The enormous copper pan flashed in the sun before striking the doppler's head, making a deep resonant sound. With a stupid grin frozen on his face, Tellico stiffened and fell, folding his arms. His form suddenly began to change, to melt and lose all true similarity. Witnessing the scene, the witcher grabbed a large rug from a stall and hurried toward him. Having unrolled the rug on the ground, he slipped the doppler onto it with two little kicks and conscientiously wrapped him in the carpet.

Sitting on the bundle, Geralt wiped his brow with his sleeve. Vespula looked at him menacingly, shaking the pan in her fist. A crowd amassed around the two of them.

"He's ill," said the witcher, forcing a smile. "It's for his own good. Don't crowd, good people. The poor man needs air."

"Didn't you hear?" Chapelle asked with quiet authority, making his way into the throng. "I suggest you to return to your activities! These assemblies are forbidden under penalty of law!"

The crowd dispersed around him to reveal Dandelion, who had been attracted, with no particular urgency, by the notes of the lute. At the sight of him, Vespula gave a terrible cry before throwing down her pan and fleeing the square at a run.

"What happened to her?" asked Dandelion. "Did she see a devil?"

Geralt got up from the rolled rug, which was beginning to wriggle slightly. Chapelle approached it slowly. He was alone. His personal guard was never visible.

"In your place, master Chapelle, I would not go any farther," Geralt said in a low voice.

"Oh yes?"

Chapelle looked at him coolly, his lips thinning.

"If I were you, master Chapelle, I would pretend to have seen nothing."

"Yes, clearly," Chapelle replied, "but you are not me."

Dainty Biberveldt, breathless and sweaty, emerged from behind the tent. He stopped short at the sight of Chapelle and began to whistle, his hands behind his back, pretending to admire the roof of the warehouse.

Chapelle came close to Geralt. The witcher remained motionless without blinking or flinching. Their eyes met for a moment, then Chapelle leaned over the bundle:

"Dudu," he said, addressing Dandelion's cordovan shoes where they protruded from the rolled and misshapen carpet. "Copy Biberveldt, quickly."

"How?" Dainty cried, looking away from the warehouse. "What?"

"Silence," Chapelle insisted. "So Dudu, how are you?"

"That's..." replied a stifled groan from inside the rug. "That's... That's..."

The cordovan shoes protruding from the carpet lost their consistency, dematerializing

to transform into the barefoot and hairy feet of the halfling.

"Get out of there, Dudu," said Chapelle. "And you, Dainty, keep quiet. To these people, all halflings look alike, don't they?"

Dainty grumbled indistinctly. Geralt stared at Chapelle, blinking suspiciously. The official straightened up and turned: the last curious onlookers on the periphery decamped on the spot in a clamor of footsteps that faded into the distance.

Dainty Biberveldt the Second extricated himself and emerged from the carpet, sneezing. He sat down, wiping his nose and eyes. Dandelion leaned against a chest that was resting on its side and strummed his lute with an intrigued expression on his face.

"Who is it? Who do you think, Dainty?" Chapelle asked gently. "It's a strong resemblance, don't you think?"

"It's my cousin," Dainty said in a whisper, and smiled widely. "A very close relation: Dudu Biberveldt from the Persicaires prairie, a genius of commerce. I've just decided to..."

"Yes, Dainty?"

"I've decided to make him my representative in Novigrad. What do you think, cousin?"

"Thank you very much, cousin," responded the very close relation, the hero of the Biberveldt clan, the genius of commerce, with a wide smile.

Chapelle smiled too.

"Your dream of living in the big city has come true," Geralt murmured.

"What are you looking for in the city, Dudu... and you, Chapelle?"

"If you had lived in the headlands," Chapelle replied, "eating roots, soaking wet and shivering in the cold, then you would know... We too want something from life, Geralt. We are no worse than you."

"That's a fact," Geralt commented, nodding. "You're not. You may even be better. What happened to the real Chapelle?"

"He kicked the bucket," Chapelle the Second said under his breath. "It was two months ago: apoplexy. May the earth above his resting place weigh lightly on him and may the Eternal Fire illuminate his path. I was nearby when it happened... No-one noticed... Geralt? You won't..."

"What didn't they notice?" asked the witcher, his face impassive.

"I thank you," Chapelle whispered.

"Are there many of you?"

"Is it important?"

"No," conceded the witcher. "It's not."

A form wearing a green hat and dressed in rabbit fur emerged from behind the carts and stalls.

"Lord Biberveldt..." the gnome stammered breathlessly, looking from one halfling to the other with amazement.

"I think, little one," Dainty said, "that you're looking for my cousin, Dudu Biberveldt. Speak, speak, here he is."

"Oxyria reports that the stock has been completely sold," explained the gnome, who smiled broadly, displaying his sharp teeth. "At 4 crowns apiece."

"I think I know what's happening," said Dainty. "Too bad Vivaldi isn't with us: he could have calculated our profit in the wink of an eye."

"If you'll allow me, cousin," interrupted Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte, also known as Penstock, Dudu to his friends and, to all the city of Novigrad, member of the numerous Biberveldt clan. "Allow me to make the calculation. I have an infallible memory for figures. Among other things."

"Please," Dainty said, bowing. "Please do, dear cousin."

"The expenses," the doppler reflected, furrowing his brow, "weren't high: 18 for the rose essence, 8.50 for the fish oil, hum... in all, including the string: 45 crowns. The transaction is 600 pieces at 4 crowns, so 2,400. And no commission in the absence of an intermediary..."

"I ask you not to forget the tax," Chapelle the Second prompted. "Remember that a representative of the municipal authorities and of the church stands before you and plans to fulfill his duties conscientiously."

"Not subject to a tax," Dudu Biberveldt fired back, "because it is a sale with religious purposes."

"Huh?"

"Mixed in suitable proportions, fish oil, wax and rose essence, colored with a little cochineal," the doppler explained, "poured into earthenware bowls around a piece of cotton cord will, when the wick is lit, burn with a beautiful red flame that will burn for a long time without an unpleasant odor: the Eternal Fire. The priests need candles for their altars to the Eternal Fire. Now we have what they need."

"By the plague," Chapelle groaned. "Indeed... We needed candles... Dudu, you really are a genius."

"I get it from my mother," Tellico replied modestly.

"A mother you closely resemble," Dainty confirmed. "Look at those eyes shining with intelligence. Just like my dear aunt, Begonia Biberveldt."

"Geralt," Dandelion moaned. "In three days, he earned more money than I have in all my life!"

"In your place," the witcher said seriously, "I would give up singing for commerce. Ask him, perhaps he'll take you on as an apprentice."

"Witcher..." Tellico grasped his sleeve. "Tell me how I can... can thank you."

"22 crowns."

"What?"

"For a new jacket. Look at what's left of this one."

"You know what?" Dandelion shouted abruptly. "We're all going to a brothel. To Passionflower! The Biberveldts' treat!"

"They'll admit halflings?" Dainty asked, worried.

"Just let them try to keep you out." Chapelle made a menacing face. "Let them try and I'll accuse the entire brothel of heresy."

"Well," Dandelion said. "All is well. And you, Geralt, are you coming with us?"

The witcher chuckled.

"You know, Dandelion," he said, "I'd actually be happy to."

A Little Dedication

This is a fan translation of a French translation of the story from Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Sword of Destiny* (*L'Epee de la Providence*). / am not a native or even a strong French speaker but I hope that the result is sufficiently readable for my fellow Anglophones.

I

The young siren emerged from the water up to her waist, violently splashing the surface with her hands. Geralt considered her breasts beautiful -perfect, even. Only their color spoiled the sight: the nipples were pale

green and the surrounding aureola paler yet. Skillfully riding the waves that she raised, the young mermaid stretched charmingly, shaking out her wet celadon-green hair, and began to sing melodiously.

"What?" The duke leaned over the railing of the ship. "What did she say?"

"She refused," said Geralt. "She says she doesn't want to."

"You've explained that I love her, that I can't imagine living without her, that I want to marry her, be only with her, and no-one else?"

"I told her that."

"And..?"

"And nothing."

"Tell her again."

The witcher touched his lips with his fingers and gave a vibrant trill. Picking up the words and the melody, he began to scrupulously pass on the duke's confessions of love.

Drifting on her back, the young siren interrupted him: "Stop translating, stop working so hard," she sang. "I understood that. When he professes his love for me, it is always the same stupid simpering. Has he said anything concrete?"

"Not really."

"That's a shame."

The siren struck the water and immersed herself with an abrupt movement of her tail. The sea foamed where it was churned by the mullet-like fin.

"What? What did she say?" asked the duke.

"That it's a shame."

"What's a shame? What does that mean: 'a shame'?"

"It sounds to me like a refusal."

"Nobody refuses me anything!" shouted the duke, in defiance of the obvious facts.

"Lord," muttered the captain of the ship as he approached the two of them, "our nets are ready. All we have to do is throw them to capture..."

"I wouldn't advise that," Geralt interrupted in a measured tone. "She isn't alone. Under the water there are many others, and the depths could hide a kraken."

The captain trembled and grew pale, fixating on the last. "A kra... a kraken?"

"A kraken," confirmed the witcher. "I don't advise that you mess about with your nets. One scream from her would reduce us to drifting planks and drown us like common

kittens. And you, Agloval, must decide: do you want a wife or a fish to keep in a bowl?"

"I love her," Agloval answered resolutely. "I want to marry her. But for that, she must have legs, and not a scaly tail. Everything is prepared: I traded two pounds of beautiful pearls for a magic elixir that is fully guaranteed to cause her to grow legs. She will suffer only a little for three days, no more. Call her, witcher, tell her one more time."

"I've already explained it to her twice. She replied that she categorically refuses, but that she knows of a sea witch whose spells can turn your legs into a magnificent tail. And do so painlessly."

"Has she lost her mind? Me, I'm expected to grow a fish tail? Not on your life! Tell her, Geralt!"

The witcher leaned heavily over the railing. In his shadow, the sea looked as lush and green as aspic. The siren emerged in a fountain of water before he

even had time to call her. She froze for a moment, balanced on her tail, then turned on her back to plunge into a wave in a movement that displayed all her charms. Geralt swallowed.

"Hey, you!" she sang. "Will it take much longer? My skin is cracking under the sun! White-haired one, ask him if he agrees."

"He doesn't agree," replied the witcher, taking up the melody. "Sh'eenaz, you must understand that he can't possibly grow a tail and live under the water. You are free to breathe the air, but he absolutely cannot breathe water!"

"I knew it!" she squealed. "I knew it! The excuses, the stupid and naive excuses: not the slightest bit of dedication! Who likes to make sacrifices? Me, I sacrifice myself for him: every day, I crawl on rocks that scrape the scales off my back and fray my fin. All for him! And now he refuses to renounce his two horrible canes? Love is not only taking, it is also devotion and dedication! Tell that to him!"

"Sh'eenaz," called Geralt. "Don't you understand? He can't live in the water!"

"I do not accept the claims of an imbecile! I... I love him too, and I want to raise fry with him, but how can I do that if he refuses to become a fish like me? Where, then, am I supposed to leave my spawn, huh? In his hat?"

"What does she say?" cried the duke. "Geralt! I didn't bring you here so that you could have a private chat with her..."

"She refuses to change her mind. She is angry."

"Throw the nets!" bawled Agloval. "I will keep her trapped in a pool for a month and..."

"Then what?" the captain interrupted rudely. "There could be a kraken under the ship! Have you ever seen a kraken, sir? Jump into the water if you want and catch her with your hands! I'm not getting involved in this. This sea is my livelihood."

"Your livelihood? I am your livelihood, you scoundrel! Throw the nets or I'll have you drawn and quartered!"

"Now see here! On this ship, I am in command. Not you!"

"Shut up, both of you." Geralt was hoarse with anger. "She's trying to tell us something. It is a difficult dialect that requires concentration!"

"I've had enough!" Sh'eenaz shouted in song. "I'm hungry. So, white-haired one, he will decide now! Tell him only that I will no longer suffer the humiliation of waiting for him while he keeps flopping around like a four-legged starfish. Tell him that I have girlfriends who can give me better satisfaction than the trifling sort he offers me on the rocks! As for me, I think he is playing at a game intended for younger fish. I am a siren, normal and sound..."

"Sh'eenaz..."

"Don't interrupt me! I haven't finished yet! I'm healthy, normal, and mature enough to spawn. If he really wants me, then he must have a tail, a fin, and everything else like a normal triton. Otherwise, I won't have anything to do with him!"

Geralt translated quickly. His efforts to avoid vulgarity were not very successful, because the duke blushed and swore horribly.

"Shameless slut!" he yelled. "Frigid whore! Go find yourself a herring!"

"What did he say?" Sh'eenaz asked, swimming close.

"He won't grow a tail!"

"Tell him... tell him to go dry out!"

"What did she say?"

"She wants you," explained the witcher, "to drown yourself."

"What a pity," sighed Dandelion. "I would have liked to come with you to the sea, but what can I do? I have such terrible seasickness! You know I've never spoken with a mermaid in my life? Damn it, it's too bad."

"I know you," said Geralt as he buckled his straps. "That won't stop you from writing your ballad."

"Of course. I already have the first verse. In my ballad, the mermaid sacrifices herself for the duke: she transforms her fish tail into magnificent little legs, but pays for her dedication with the loss of her voice. The duke betrays her and rejects her. She dies of grief and transforms into sea-foam when the rays of the sun..."

"Who's going to believe that nonsense?"

"It doesn't matter," Dandelion grumbled. "I don't write my ballads to be believable, I write them to be moving. Why am I talking to you about this? You don't know anything. Tell me instead, how much did Agloval pay you?"

"He didn't give me anything. He argued that I hadn't fulfilled my part of the mission, that he expected something else from me... That he rewards effects, not good intentions."

Dandelion nodded and took off his hat, looking at the witcher. He pursed his lips in disappointment.

"Does that mean we still don't have any money?"

"It looks like it."

Dandelion's grimace grew even more pathetic.

"It's all my fault," he moaned. "Everything is my fault. Geralt, are you angry with me?"

No, the witcher was not angry with Dandelion. Far from it.

Still, there was no doubt that they owed their misadventures to Dandelion. It was the bard who had insisted on going to the party at Four Maples. Attending parties, he explained, satisfied a deep and natural human need. From time to time, claimed the musician, a man must meet his fellow man in a place where one can laugh and sing, eat kebabs and dumplings, drink beer, listen to music, dance and fondle girls whose curves glisten with sweat. If each individual decided to satisfy those needs any old way, he argued, without concerted organization, boundless chaos would ensue. That's why festivals and parties were invented. And when festivals and parties were organized, it was only appropriate to attend.

Geralt wasn't stubborn enough to refuse, even if, on the list of his own deep and natural needs, attending parties was somewhere near the bottom. He agreed to accompany Dandelion, as he was relying on the contacts from such meetings to obtain information on available work: for a long time, no-one had called on him and his purse was beginning to grow dangerously light.

Nor did the witcher blame Dandelion for provoking the guards. Geralt, in this case,

was not himself blameless: he could have intervened and stopped the combative impulses of the troubadour, but he did not, preferring not to stand with the primitive forest guards known as the Foresters. That organization of volunteers had a nasty reputation for their mission of hunting "non-humans." Geralt yawned while listening to their boasting on the subject of elves, dryads or evil fairies pierced with arrows, slaughtered or hanged from trees. Dandelion, in contrast, emboldened by his association with the witcher, made his feelings known. At first the Foresters did not react badly to his banter, his jokes and his unpopular suggestions, which provoked gales of laughter from the farmers observing the scene. However, when Dandelion sang an outrageous verse that he had invented for the occasion, ending with the words "you're as thick as two short planks, so you must be a Forester," the situation degenerated into a pitched battle. The shed that served as the tavern went up in smoke. A squad under the command of Budibog the Bald, in whose domain Four-Maples was included, was forced to intervene. He ruled that the Foresters, Dandelion, and Geralt shared

responsibility for the damages and the crimes, including the recent seduction of an under-aged redhead who was found after the event, in the bushes behind the field, smiling foolishly with a flushed complexion and her tunic torn down to her waist. Luckily, Budibog the Bald knew Dandelion. The sentence was commuted to a fine which nonetheless depleted all their funds. They also had to flee Four-Maples on horseback as soon as possible to avoid the vengeance of the Foresters, who had been exiled from the village and desired revenge. In the surrounding woods, forty individuals were engaged in the hunt. Geralt had no desire to become a target for the Foresters' arrows, whose harpoon-shaped tips caused horrific wounds.

Their original plan was displaced by a detour through the villages along the forest edge, where Geralt hoped to find some work. They took the road from the sea toward Bremervoord. Unfortunately, Geralt found no work except for his involvement in the affair of Duke Agloval and the mermaid Sh'eenaz, whose chances of succeeding were a priori very slim. Geralt's gold ring and the Alexandrite brooch from one of Dandelion's numerous dalliances had been sold to buy food. Despite their present difficulties, the witcher nevertheless felt no resentment toward Dandelion.

"No, Dandelion," he said. "I'm not angry with you."

Dandelion didn't believe a word of it. This explained the silence of the troubadour, who was rarely quiet. He patted the neck of his horse after searching afresh through the saddle-bags. Geralt knew he would find nothing of value. The smell food that the breeze brought from a nearby farm became unbearable.

"Master!" someone shouted suddenly. "Oy, Master!"

"Yes?" Geralt responded, turning.

From a two-wheeled cart drawn by two asses and parked to one side, there descended a man with an imposing paunch, dressed in felt shoes and a heavy fur-trimmed wolf-skin coat.

"Uh... Well..." the stout man said, embarrassed, as he approached. "I was not addressing you, sir, I only meant... Master Dandelion..."

"That's me," the poet proudly confirmed, adjusting his feather-plumed hat. "What can I do for you, good man?"

"With utmost respect, Master," said the heavyset man, "my name is Teleri Drouhard, spice merchant by trade, dean of the local guild. It's that my son Gaspard is engaged to Dalia, the daughter of Mestvin, captain of the royal navy."

"Ah," said Dandelion, flawlessly maintaining a serious expression. "Extend my congratulations and best wishes to the lucky couple. And what can I help you with? Is it the right of first night? That, I never refuse."

"Huh? No... not that... In fact, the banquet and the wedding will be tonight. It's that my wife wanted to invite you to Bremervoord, Master Dandelion, and forced my hand..."

That's women for you. Listen, she said to me, 'Teleri, we should show the world that we are not governed by ignorance, but culture and art, you know, that when we host a banquet it's refined, not just an excuse for binge drinking until you throw up.' I told that stupid woman: so we already called a bard, isn't that enough? She answers that a bard isn't enough, that, oh la la, Master Dandelion, now there's a celebrity to make the neighbors die of jealousy. Master? Would you do us the honor? I symbolically present you with 25 good talars... in support of the arts..."

"Do my ears deceive me?" Dandelion demanded, after this last part. "Me, I'm expected to play second fiddle? You want me to be the side act for some other musician? Me? I have never yet fallen so low, venerable sir, as to be reduced to mere accompaniment for someone else."

Drouhard flushed.

"Excuse me, Master," he stammered. "It wasn't me, but my wife... I hold you in the highest honor..."

"Dandelion," whispered Geralt under his breath, "stop taking on airs. We need the coin."

"Don't tell me what to do," insisted the poet. "Me, putting on airs? Me? You're one to talk, the one who refuses interesting jobs every other day! You won't kill the hirikkhis because it's an endangered species; not the scorpion flies either because they're not dangerous; not to mention the noctambelles because they are charming sorceresses; and the dragons, because that's against your code of ethics. I too, you may imagine, am someone with self-respect! I too have my own personal code!"

"Dandelion, I'm begging you, do it for me. A little dedication, lad, that's all I ask. I promise that I won't be so choosy next time. Come on, Dandelion..."

The troubadour scratched the peach-fuzz on his chin and stared at the ground. Drouhard came closer shouting:

"Master... Grant us this honor. It's just that my wife would never forgive me for coming back without you. And so... I'll raise the price to 30."

"35!" Dandelion bid firmly.

Geralt smiled and sniffed hopefully at the smell of food coming from the farm.

"All right, Master, all right," Teleri Drouhard said quickly, so quickly it was obvious that he could easily follow the auction until 40. "And... my house, if you like, to refresh and relax you, Master, is yours. And you, sir... To whom do I owe the honor?"

"Geralt of Rivia."

"You too, sir, you're invited... to eat, drink..."

"Of course, with pleasure," interrupted Dandelion. "Show us the way, good sir Drouhard. Between the two of us, the other bard - who is it?"

"The honorable lady Essi Daven."

III

Geralt rubbed his belt buckle and the silver studs of his jacket with his sleeve once more, combed his hair and tied it back with a cord and polished his shoes, rubbing the sides of his boots together.

"Dandelion?"

"Yes?"

The bard stroked the egret plume attached to his hat, smoothed and straightened his jacket. Both had spent half a day washing their clothes to make them presentable.

"What is it, Geralt?"

"Try to behave yourself so that they run us off after the party, and not before."

"Very funny." Dandelion was indignant. "I advise you to mind your manners. Shall we go in?"

"Let's go. Do you hear that? Someone's singing. It's a woman."

"You just noticed? That's Essi Daven, known as Little-Eye. You never met a woman bard? Ah yes! I forgot that you avoid places where art flourishes. Little-Eye is a poet and a gifted singer, but not without some ill-mannered faults, if I can trust my ears, not without them in the least. What she's singing now is actually none other than my own ballad. Just wait, she'll hear my performance and we'll see that little eye squint in envy."

"Dandelion, for pity's sake. They'll throw us out."

"Don't interfere. This is a professional matter. Let's go in."

"Dandelion?"

"Yes?"

"Why Little-Eye'?"

"You'll see."

The wedding took place in a huge warehouse, emptied of its usual barrels of herrings and fish oil. The smell had almost been lifted by the hanging bunches of mistletoe and heather decorated with ribbons. Here and there, as was the custom, garlands of garlic were hung, to scare off supposed vampires. The tables and benches that flanked the walls were covered with white cloths. In one corner, a great bonfire and a spit had been installed. Although it was crowded, there was no uproar. Over five hundred people of different nations and trades, along with the spotty-faced groom and the bride he was devouring with his gaze, listened in silent contemplation to the charming ballad of a young woman, wearing a modest blue dress and sitting on a stage, singing melodiously, accompanied by a lute that rested on her knee. The girl couldn't have been older than eighteen. She was extremely thin. Her hair, long and full, was dark gold. She finished her song as they entered. She received the thunderous applause that was lavished upon her with a nod of her head that shook her hair.

"I bid you welcome, Master, welcome." Drouhard, dressed in his finest clothes, seized them and led them to the center of the warehouse. "And welcome to you, Sir Gerard... It is a great honor... Yes... Allow me... Venerable ladies and gentlemen! Here is our honorable host, who does us the honor of honoring us... Master Dandelion, the famous singer and writer of verse... and poet! who honors us with this very great honor... Honors us so..."

The cries of joy and applause drowned out Drouhard's stammered speech before he could choke. Dandelion, proud as a peacock, adopted a manner equal to the occasion and bowed deeply before gesturing with his hand to the young girls sitting in a row, like chickens on their perch, and were monitored, from the second row, by a squad of old matrons. The girls didn't flinch, giving the impression that they had been affixed to the bench with carpenter's glue or something equally effective. Without exception, they held their hands flat on their knees and kept their mouths open.

"Well then!" Drouhard called, "come, drink beer, my friends! And eat! Over here, over here! By the grace of..."

The girl dressed in blue fought her way through the crowd that rushed, like a wave against the reefs, toward the tables laden with food.

"Hi, Dandelion," she said.

Especially since he began traveling with Dandelion, Geralt considered expressions such as "eyes like the stars," which the bard used to indiscriminately compliment the girls, to be banal and trite. In the case of Essi Daven, even someone as deaf to poetry as Geralt must concede that the expression was nonetheless fitting. In a cute and friendly little face distinguished by nothing in particular, there burned and shone a dark blue eye, beautiful,

huge, hypnotic. The second eye of Essi Daven was mostly covered by a golden circlet that fell across her cheek, which she habitually adjusted by shaking her head or puffing at it: thus the second eye of Small-Eye was unveiled, revealing a perfect similarity with the first.

"Hi, Little-Eye," Dandelion replied with a grin. "You sang a beautiful ballad earlier. You have significantly improved your repertoire. I've always said that when one can't write one's own verse, one must borrow it from others. Is that common practice for you?"

"Not really," Essi Daven replied, tit for tat, with a smile that revealed small white teeth. "It's been known to happen. Not as often as I would like, but I usually don't have the option: the lyrics are poorly written and the melodies, while certainly enjoyable and unpretentious in their simplicity - if not downright simplistic - don't measure up to my listeners' expectations. You've written something new, Dandelion? I hadn't heard."

"Not surprisingly," the bard replied with a sigh. "I sing my ballads in places where only the most gifted and famous artists are invited: just the kind of place where I never see you."

Essi flushed crimson and blew on her circlet.

"It is a fact," she said, "that I am not in the habit of frequenting brothels. I find their atmosphere depressing. It saddens me that you have to perform in such places, but so it goes. When you have no talent, you don't have the luxury of choosing your audience."

This time, it was Dandelion who blushed hotly. Little-Eye smiled happily and immediately fell upon his neck, kissing him noisily on the cheek. The witcher was surprised, but only a little. A colleague of Dandelion could hardly be expected to be less unpredictable than Dandelion himself.

"Dandelion, you dear old fool!" Essi said, continuing the hug. "I'm so glad to see you in good health, physical and mental."

"Hey, Doll." Dandelion lifted the tiny girl and whirled her around until the ruffles of her dress twirled. "You were wonderful, by the gods. I haven't heard such lovely wickedness in a long time. Your quarrels are even better than your singing. And you are beautiful too!"

"How many times have I told you," Essi said, puffing on her circlet and then looking to Geralt, "not to call me 'Doll,' Dandelion? Besides, it's about time that you introduced your companion, who I see is not a colleague of ours."

"Thank the gods for that," cried the bard, laughing. "He has neither voice nor ear for poetry, Doll - at best, he knows how to combine booze and syphilis. This is a representative of the witcher trade: Geralt of Rivia. Come here, Geralt, and kiss Little-Eye's hand."

The witcher approached without knowing how to react. The kissing of hands was generally practiced on the rings of duchesses, before whom it was necessary to kneel. In regards to women of less exalted rank, here in the South the gesture was considered a mark of eroticism and remained reserved only for established couples.

Little-Eye, however, dispelled Geralt's doubts by energetically extending a hand with the fingers pointed down. The witcher took her hand clumsily and kissed it. The cheeks of Essi, who had kept one eye fixed on him, colored.

"Geralt of Rivia!" she said. "You don't keep company with just anyone, Dandelion."

"It's my honor," murmured the witcher, aware that he sounded no more eloquent than Drouhard. "Madam..."

"To hell with all that," growled Dandelion. "Stop making Little-Eye uncomfortable with your titles and your stuttering. Her name is Essi and Essi, his name is Geralt. Introductions are over. Time to get serious, Doll."

"If you call me 'Doll' again, I'll smack your ear. What are these serious matters we need to discuss?"

"We need to decide the order of our program. I propose that we take turns performing our ballads. This will have the best effect. Of course, everyone will sing his own ballads."

"Maybe."

"How much is Drouhard paying you?"

"That's none of your business. Who's going to start?"

"Me."

"Agreed. Hey! Look who's decided to honor us with his presence! That's Duke Agloval. He just came in, look."

"Hey, hey! The quality of the audience rises," Dandelion said joyfully. "But there is no room for complacency either: Agloval is a miser. Geralt can attest to that. The duke loathes giving up his coin. He hires people, it's true, but as for settling the accounts afterward..."

"I heard about that." Essi pushed back her circlet and looked at Geralt. "It was being discussed at the port and on the docks. This is about the famous Sh'eenaz, is it not?"

Agloval answered the deep reverence of the honor guard at the door with a curt nod and walked directly toward Drouhard, whom he drew into a corner,

which prevented him from drawing the attention of the guests at the center of the room. Geralt watched them out of the corner of his eye. The conversation took place in low tones, but the two speakers seemed extremely agitated. Drouhard could not stop wiping his forehead with his sleeve, turning his head, and scratching his neck. At his questions the duke, his expression stiff and dour, responded by shrugging his shoulders.

"The duke," Essi said in a low voice, pressing against Geralt, "seems preoccupied. Could it still be a matter of the heart? This morning's misunderstanding with the famous little mermaid? What do you think, witcher?"

"Could be." Geralt, strangely surprised and irritated by the question, afforded the poet a furtive glance. "Everyone has his own problems. Not all of us can get by singing at fairs."

Little-Eye paled slightly. She puffed at her circlet, eying him with an air of challenge.

"By saying that, did you hope to hurt me or simply offend me?"

"Neither. I only intended to stave off the other questions about the problems of Agloval and his mermaid that I don't feel able to answer."

"I understand." The pretty eye of Essi Daven narrowed slightly. "I will not present you with any more such dilemmas. I will not ask the questions I would like to ask and that I was considering, to be honest, to be an invitation to a friendly conversation. Thus there will be no discussion between us. Have no fear; it will not become the subject of a song at a fair. The pleasure was all mine."

She turned her back quickly to move to a respectable distance toward the tables. Dandelion shifted his stance and muttered:

"You can't say that you were friendly to her, Geralt."

"I admit, it's stupid," responded the witcher. "I hurt her for no reason. Maybe I'd better go and offer her an apology..."

"Stop," said the bard, adding solemnly, "It's difficult to correct the first impression. Come, let's pour the beer instead."

They didn't have time to drink their beer because Drouhard, extracting himself from conversation with a group of citizens, accosted them:

"Lord Gerard," he said, "excuse me. His Lordship the Duke wants to speak with you."

"I'm coming."

Dandelion took the witcher's sleeve.

"Geralt, don't forget."

"What?"

"You made a promise to accept whatever missions you are proposed without sulking. I have your word. How did you put it? A little dedication?"

"I know, Dandelion. But how do you know that Agloval..."

"I have a nose for it, remember, Geralt."

"Sure, Dandelion."

He went with Drouhard to a corner of the room, far from the guests. Agloval was sitting on a low stool. At his side was a swarthy man in colorful clothing and a short black beard. Geralt had not noticed him earlier.

"We meet again, witcher," the duke began, "in spite of my oath this morning never to see you again. But I have no other witcher at hand. You will have to do. Meet Zelest, my steward in charge of pearl diving."

"This morning," the swarthy man intoned quietly, "I wanted to extend our fishing area. A boat went adrift farther west, behind the cape, in the direction of the Dragon's Teeth."

"The Dragon's Teeth," put in Agloval, "are two grand volcanic reefs that emerge from the tip of the cape. They are visible from the shore."

"Yes," Zelest confirmed. "In general, we don't sail there because there are many whirlpools and rocks. Diving is dangerous. But on the shore, there are fewer and fewer pearls. Therefore a boat was sent there with a seven-man crew: two sailors and five divers. That night, when they did not return, we grew worried, even though the sea was as flat as oil. I sent two fast skiffs which found the boat adrift. Not a soul was aboard. Vanished without a trace. It's impossible to know what happened. But there was a fight. Massacre. Signs..."

The witcher blinked.

"What signs?"

"Deck covered with blood."

Drouhard whistled and glanced anxiously around. Zelest lowered his voice:

"It is just as I say," he repeated, clenching his teeth. "Boat covered in blood. Butchery. Something has murdered people. One might say a sea monster. Yes, undoubtedly a sea monster."

"No pirates?" Geralt asked quietly. "No competing pearl divers? You have ruled out the possibility that they were boarded and attacked with ordinary knives?"

"We have ruled it out," replied the duke. "There are neither pirates nor competition in the area. Piracy does not end with the disappearance of all crew members without exception. No, Geralt, Zelest is right. It's the work of a sea monster, nothing else. Listen, no-one dares go out to sea, even in the corners that are well-marked and familiar. People are paralyzed by fear. The port is at a standstill. Even the ships and galleys do not leave the dock. You see, witcher?"

"I understand," said Geralt with a nod of his head. "Who will show me the place?"

"Ah!" Agloval rested his hand on the table and drummed his fingers. "I like that. Finally a reaction from the witcher. Let's not quibble over the details. You see, Drouhard: a good witcher is a hungry witcher. Isn't that so, Geralt? Without your musician friend, you would still go to sleep tonight without a bite to eat! This is good news for you, isn't it?"

Drouhard bowed his head. Zelest looked blankly at him.

"Who will show me the place?" Geralt repeated, staring coldly at Agloval.

"Zelest," said the duke, his smile fading. "When will you get to work?"

"Tomorrow morning. Be on the pier, sir Zelest."

"Yes, master witcher."

"Great." The duke rubbed his hands with a new and mocking smile. "Geralt, I hope the adventure with this monster ends better than the one with Sh'eenaz. I'm counting on it. Ah, one more thing. I forbid you to discuss this matter. I don't want to cause panic over anything more important than what I already have on my back. Is that understood, Drouhard? I will have your tongue ripped out if it appears that you have loose lips."

"I understand, Duke."

"Good." Agloval rose. "I'll go before I spoil your fun and feed the rumor. Farewell,

Drouhard, I want you to give all my best wishes to the couple."

"Thank you, Duke."

Essi Daven, sitting on a stool and surrounded by a dense ring of listeners, was singing a melodious and nostalgic ballad about the misfortunes of a woman betrayed. Leaning against a pole, Dandelion mumbled something under his breath, counting the time and the syllables on his fingers.

"So," he asked, "you've found some work?"

"Yes."

The witcher did not go into details, about which the bard cared little.

"I told you. I have a flair for money. Good, very good. I earn a little coin and so do you. We're going to treat ourselves. Then we'll go to Cidaris for the harvest festival. But excuse me a moment: I've spotted something interesting on the bench."

Geralt followed the poet's gaze, but apart from the dozen girls with their lips parted, he noticed nothing of interest. Dandelion straightened his jacket, tipped his hat at a jaunty angle and went, fully immersed in his role, toward the bench. Dodging the attending matrons with a sidelong maneuver, he began his ritual with a charming smile.

Essi Daven ended her ballad. The audience gave her its applause, a small purse, and a large bouquet of chrysanthemums, admittedly a little faded.

The witcher strolled into the crowd of guests in search of an opportunity to find a place at the table of food. With dismay, he saw the rapid disappearance of pickled herring, stuffed cabbage, boiled codfish heads, mutton chops, slices of salami, slices of smoked salmon and ham; the problem was that there were no places free.

The young girls and the matrons surrounded Dandelion with some excitement and asked him to sing a song. He replied with an insincere smile and gave a refusal out of false modesty.

Having conquered his politeness, Geralt finally managed to seat himself at the table: an elderly man, smelling strongly of vinegar, helpfully and forcefully cleared a space by almost toppling the bench along with all his neighbors. Geralt did not wait to start eating. In the blink of an eye he emptied the only dish he could reach. The man who reeked of vinegar slid him another. To thank him, Geralt was forced to listen patiently to a long tirade on youth and modern times. The man equated social liberties with flatulence. Geralt had trouble keeping a straight face.

Essi stood against the wall, alone amid the branches of mistletoe, in the process of tuning her lute. The witcher saw a young man dressed in a brocade doublet bend close to her and say something with a faint smile. Essi looked at him and pursed her pretty lips, responding with a few quick words. The young man stiffened and turned sharply on his heel. His ears, red as rubies, glowed for a long time in the semi-darkness of the room.

"... horror, shame and humiliation," continued the man who smelled of vinegar. "An enormous flatulence, sir."

"I'm sure you're right," Geralt replied without conviction, wiping his plate with a piece of bread.

"Venerable lords and excellencies, we humbly ask for silence," cried Drouhard at the center of the room. "The famous Master Dandelion will sing for us, despite his fatigue and mild illness, the famous ballad of Queen Marienn and the black crow! He performs at the personal request of Miss Veverka, our beloved miller's daughter whom, I quote Master Dandelion, he cannot refuse!"

Miss Veverka, one of the less pretty girls on the bench, was transformed in the twinkling of an eye. A tumult of applause covered the recurring flatulence of the man who smelled of vinegar. Dandelion waited for complete silence before entering into a dramatic introduction and began to sing without taking his eyes from Miss Veverka. The young girl

grew more attractive from couplet to couplet. A little flirtation is more effective than all the creams and magic essences that Yennefer sells in her boutique in Vengerberg, thought Geralt.

He noticed Essi sneak behind the semicircle of Dandelion's listeners and discreetly vanish out to the terrace. Driven by a strange impulse, he politely left the table and followed after her.

Leaning against the railing, Essi leaned on her elbows, her head held between her slender arms. Her gaze was lost in the waves of the sea that were highlighted by the light of the moon and the lamps of the port. The wood creaked under Geralt's feet. Essi straightened.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to disturb you," he said stiffly, watching her lips take on the same pinched expression that the poet had turned on the young man in brocade.

"You're not bothering me," she replied with a smile and pushed back her circlet. "I'm not looking for solitude here, only the fresh air. Does the smoke and stale air bother you as well?"

"Somewhat, but what bothers me more is the knowledge that I hurt you. I have come to ask for your forgiveness, Essi, and for another chance to have a friendly conversation with you."

"I'm the one who should ask forgiveness," she said, resting her hands on the railing. "I reacted too rashly. It happens all the time: I can't control myself. Forgive me and allow me another chance to speak with you."

He walked over and leaned next to her. He felt a warmth emanating from her person, and a faint smell of verbena. Geralt was fond of that scent, even if it was not the equal of lilac and gooseberry.

"What does the sea make you think of, Geralt?" she asked suddenly.

"Of worry," he responded spontaneously.

"Interesting. You seem so calm and composed to me."

"I didn't say that I felt worried. You asked me what I associate with the sea."

"Associations are a reflection of the soul. I should know: I'm a poet."

"And what is the sea for you?" Geralt asked quickly, to avoid any rambling about any supposed uneasiness he felt.

"A perpetual movement," she replied after reflection. "Change. And an enigma, a mystery, something that I cannot understand, that I could describe a thousand ways in a thousand poems without ever reaching the core or the essence. Yes, that's probably it."

"What you're feeling is also worry," he said, the scent of verbenas growing stronger and stronger. "Yet you seem so calm and composed..."

She turned, causing her circlet to slip and placing her beautiful eyes on him.

"I am neither calm nor composed."

It happened suddenly, without warning. The gesture that he made, which should have been a brief touch to her shoulders, became an ardent grip on her waist. Geralt approached quickly, but without violence, until the unexpected contact with the girl's body made his blood boil. Essi froze suddenly, stiffened and arched her back, and seized the witcher's hands as if to pull or drag them from her waist.

"Why... what's the point?"

The circlet fell, and from behind it appeared the wide open eyes of Little-Eye.

The witcher brought his face close to hers. They kissed on the lips. For the moment, Essi didn't release the hands that Geralt put on her waist; she continued to arch her back to avoid the contact of their bodies. They spun around each other in this position as if in a dance. Essi kissed Geralt with passion and expertise. At length.

Then the girl deftly and effortlessly broke free from the grip of the witcher. Leaning back against the railing, she put her head in her hands once more. Geralt suddenly felt terribly foolish. The feeling stopped him from approaching her and kissing her hunched shoulders.

"Why?" she asked coldly without turning. "Why did you do that?"

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. The witcher knew he had taken the wrong path and found himself standing on a thin layer of grass and moss ready to collapse under the force of any insincerity, lies, deceit, or bravado.

"Why?" she repeated.

Geralt did not answer.

"Looking for a woman for the night?"

He did not answer. Essi turned and touched his shoulder.

"Let's go back inside," she said without apparent emotion, but this untroubled tone did not deceive the witcher, who felt a strong tension.

"Don't make that face: nothing happened. I'm not looking for a man for the night. Don't feel guilty, all right?"

"Essi..."

"Let's go, Geralt. The audience is calling for Dandelion's third encore. It's my turn, now. I'll sing..."

Essi pushed back her circlet with a puff of breath. She looked at him strangely.

"I'll sing for you."

IV

"Aha!" The witcher feigned astonishment. "You're already home? I thought that you wouldn't come back tonight."

Dandelion secured the hasp of the door, hung up his lute and feather-plumed hat on a nail, then took off his jacket, dusted it, and left it on some bags lying in a corner of the small room. Aside from those bags, a mattress and an enormous bale of hay, the room contained no furniture: even the candle dripped a pool of wax on the floor. Drouhard admired Dandelion, but obviously not to the point of offering him a real bedroom or alcove.

"Why did you think I wouldn't be back tonight?" Dandelion asked, removing his shoes.

The witcher got up on his elbows, making the straw creak. "I thought that you would be delivering a serenade outside the window of Miss Veverka,

the girl you've been feasting your eyes on all evening like a dog fixated on his bitch."

"Hey, hey!" the bard replied, laughing. "You can be so stupid and primitive! Don't you understand? I never had any fondness for Veverka. I simply wanted to make Miss Akeretta jealous before I make my move tomorrow. Move over a little."

Dandelion collapsed on the mattress and tugged the thick rug that covered Geralt toward himself. Feeling a strange anger rising within him, the witcher turned his head toward the window through which, despite the presence of numerous cobwebs, he could see the stars.

"What's the matter with you?" asked the poet. "Does it bother you that I chase after girls? Since when? Would you have me take an oath of purity like a druid? Or maybe..."

"Quit posturing. I'm tired. Haven't you noticed that we have a mattress and roof over our heads for the first time in two weeks? The idea that you won't be roughly shaken awake tomorrow doesn't make you crazy with joy?"

"For me," mused Dandelion, "a mattress without a young woman isn't a mattress at all. It is incomplete happiness... and what good is incomplete happiness?"

Geralt groaned softly. Enjoying the sound of his own voice, Dandelion continued his late-night chatter:

"Incomplete happiness, it's... like an interrupted kiss... Why are you grinding your teeth, may I ask?"

"You are terribly boring, Dandelion: you have no subjects of conversation except for beds, girls, asses, breasts, incomplete happiness and kisses interrupted by the dogs set upon you by the parents of giddy brides. Apparently, you can't stop yourself. Only the frivolity, or the debauchery, enables you to compose ballads, write poems and sing. It is, you see, the dark side of your talent."

The witcher had spoken with emotion.

Dandelion had no trouble reading his sentiments:

"Aha!" the bard replied serenely. "This must be because of Essi Daven, our Little-Eye. She cast her pretty little eye over the witcher and started sowing disorder. He went off violently in front of the princess. And instead of blaming himself, he reproaches me for I don't know what hidden agenda."

"You talk a lot of shit, Dandelion."

"No, my friend. Essi made a big impression on you. Don't deny it. I don't see anything wrong with it, but be careful not to put a foot wrong. She is not as you imagine her. If her talent has many dark sides, they aren't the ones you think."

"I see," the witcher said. "You know her very well."

"Quite well. But not in the way you think, no."

"It's amazing to hear you admit it."

"You really are stupid." The bard stretched, placing his hands at his neck. "I've known Little-Eye almost since she was a child. For me... she's like a little sister. I repeat: don't make any stupid moves with her. You would do a lot of damage, because she's fallen for your charms, too. Admit that you want her."

"Even if I did, I don't usually talk about these things, unlike you," Geralt said impassively. "I don't compose songs on the subject. Thank you for what you told me about her. It actually saved me from making a stupid mistake. Now drop it. As far as I'm concerned the matter is closed."

Dandelion lay in silence for a moment. Geralt nonetheless knew his companion well:

"I know," the poet said finally. "I understand everything."

"You don't understand anything, Dandelion."

"Do you know what your problem is? You appear to be something that you're not. You flaunt your otherness, what you consider to be your abnormality. You impose this upon yourself, never understanding that for most ordinary people, you yourself are one of the most normal people who ever lived. What difference does it make that your reflexes are faster, that your pupils become vertical slits in the sun, that you can see in the dark like a cat and that you can cast whatever spells you know? What do I care? I once knew an innkeeper who could fart for ten minutes without interruption and in this way managed to interpret the melody of the psalm Welcome, welcome the morning star. Aside from what one might call his talent, he was a perfectly normal innkeeper with a wife, children, and a paralytic grandmother."

"Can you explain what this has to do with Essi Daven?"

"Of course. You wrongly assumed that Little-Eye was interested in you for dubious, even perverse reasons, that she looked at you with the fascination reserved for a unicorn, a two-headed calf or a salamander in a bestiary. You provoked her animosity at the first opportunity in the form of an unkind and unjustified reprimand; you returned a blow that she didn't deal. I saw it with my own eyes! I didn't witness the events that followed, but I noticed that you left the room and her cheeks were red when you returned. Yes, Geralt. I'll inform you of a mistake you made. You wanted to get revenge for the, in your opinion, prurient interest that she displayed. You then decided to take advantage of her fondness for you."

"I say again: you're talking crap."

"You tried," the bard continued without budging from the mattress, "to get her into

bed by showing her what it's like to go to bed with a monster, a mutant, a witcher. Fortunately, Essi showed herself to be smarter than you are and tremendously sympathetic to your stupidity, whose causes she understands. I infer this from the fact that you did not return from the terrace with a black eye."

"Have you finished?"

"I'm finished."

"Fine, good night."

"I know why you fidget and grind your teeth."

"Of course, you know everything."

"I know that you've been tortured to the point where you aren't capable of understanding a normal woman. But you're under Yennefer's thumb: the devil knows what you see in her."

"Drop it, Dandelion."

"Really, you wouldn't prefer a normal girl like Essi? But what can those sorceresses have that Essi doesn't? Age? Perhaps Little-Eye is early in her youth, but she is at least as old as she looks. Do you know what Yennefer told me one day after some drinks? Hah... She told me she did it with a man for the first time in the year that the plow was invented from two plowshares!"

"You're lying. Yennefer likes you as much as a malevolent pestilence. She would never have admitted anything like that to you."

"You're right. I lied. I admit it."

"You don't have to: I know you well."

"It seems to you that you know me. Never forget that human nature can be complex."

"Dandelion," sighed the witcher, falling halfway asleep already, "you're nothing but a cynic, a disgusting womanizer and a liar. Nothing about that, believe me, is truly complex. Good night."

"Good night, Geralt."

"You get up early, Essi."

The poet smiled, holding her windblown hair. She advanced slowly along the pier, avoiding the holes formed by the rotten boards.

"I couldn't resist the urge to watch the witcher at work. Will you still consider me a filthy busybody? Well yes, I'll admit it: I am actually a little curious. How is your work going?"

"What work?"

"Oh, Geralt!" she said. "You underestimate my curiosity and my aptitude for collecting and interpreting information. I already know all about the fishermen's accident; I know the details of your last contract with Agloval. I also know that you're looking for a helmsman willing to take you to the shore of the Dragon's Teeth. Have you found one?"

He studied her for a moment before he decided to speak:

"No. I haven't found a one."

"They are afraid?"

"Yes."

"How then will you perform your reconnaissance without crossing the sea? If you can't navigate, how will you tickle the ribs of the monster responsible for the death of the fishermen?"

Geralt took the hand of the girl and led her away from the pier. They walked on the rocky beach, between the boats perched on the shore, along the rows of nets suspended from posts and through curtains of dried and gutted fish blown by the wind. Geralt found to his surprise that the girl's company was neither unpleasant nor burdensome. He also hoped that a peaceful and pleasant conversation would erase the memory of the kiss on the terrace. Essi's presence on the pier meant, moreover, that she didn't want him. He was happy.

"Tickle the monster's ribs," he muttered, repeating the girl's words. "If I knew how... My knowledge in matters of marine teratology remains very

limited."

"Interesting. According to what I know, there are a lot more monsters in the sea than on the land, in terms of both individuals and species. It seems to me then that it's good hunting grounds for a witcher."

"That's not so."

"Why?"

"The spread of humans to the ocean," he replied, clearing his throat and turning his head, "is too recent. Witchers were especially necessary on land at the time of the first settlement. We are not adapted for combat with sea creatures, even though the most aggressive creatures abound underwater, it's true. The capabilities of witchers aren't enough against these sea monsters. These creatures are either too large or too well-protected behind their shells or finally too much at ease in their element. Or all three at once."

"What do you think about the monster that killed the fishermen? Do you have any suspicions?"

"It could be a kraken."

"No, a kraken would have destroyed the boat that was recovered intact and covered in blood." Little-Eye grew pale and swallowed. "Don't think that's idle speculation. I was raised next to the sea... I saw more than one creature."

"A giant squid could throw people over the side..."

"Then there would be no blood. Geralt, it's neither squid nor orca nor turtle-dragon, because our monster neither destroyed nor overturned the boat. Maybe you're making a mistake in looking for the culprit in the sea."

The witcher considered this.

"I begin to admire you, Essi," he said. The poet blushed. "You're right. This could be an attack from the sky: an ornithodragon, a griffon, a wyvern, a

dermoptera or a diploures giant. Maybe even a..."

"Excuse me," Essi interrupted. "Look who's coming."

Agloval only skirted the shore. His clothes were drenched. His anger seemed to intensify when he saw them.

Essi bowed discreetly, while Geralt inclined his head and tapped his chest with his fist. Agloval spat.

"I waited on the rocks for three hours, almost since the sun rose," he growled. "She hasn't shown. Three hours to wait like an idiot on wave-swept rocks."

"I see... I'm sorry," muttered the witcher.

"Sorry?" the duke exploded. "Sorry? But everything is your fault. You're the one who bungled the job. You're the one who ruined everything."

"What did I ruin? I only acted as the translator..."

"To hell with all this!" he interrupted nervously, putting himself in profile. It was a very royal profile, meriting inclusion on a well-beaten currency. "I would be better off if I hadn't resorted to your services. This may sound strange, but when we had no translator, we understood one another better, Sh'eenaz and me, if you know what I mean. Now... you know what they say in town? It's whispered that the fishermen died because I lost my temper with the siren. That it was revenge."

"Absurd," the witcher commented icily.

"How do I know it's absurd?" the duke burst out. "What do I know, except for what you told me? Do I know what she is capable of? What monsters can hear her there, in the depths? Prove to me, please, that it's absurd. Bring me the head of the monster that slaughtered the fishermen. Get to work instead of flirting on the beach..."

"To work?" Geralt exploded. "But how? Should I cross the sea riding on a barrel? Your Zelest threatened the sailors with the worst tortures and the

gallows... There's nothing I can do: no-one wants to take me. Zelest himself is not exactly eager. How..."

"What's that to me: how?" Agloval yelled, cutting him off. "It's your business! Weren't the witchers created so that normal people do not have to wonder how to get rid of monsters? I hired your services and I demand that you obey me. Otherwise, go to hell before I drive you with a stick to the very borders of my domain!"

"Calm yourself, my lord Duke," said Little-Eye in a low voice despite her nervous pallor and the trembling of her hands. "And stop threatening Geralt, please. Dandelion and I are honored to count among our friends the king Ethain Cidaris, one of our fans, an enthusiastic amateur artist. The king Ethain is an enlightened sovereign who considers our ballads not only from the perspective of music and rhyme, but also as a chronicle of humanity. Would you, my lord duke, like to appear in this chronicle? I can help you."

Agloval looked at her for a moment with a cold and indifferent expression.

"The fishermen who died had wives and children," he finally said in a voice that was much more measured and calm. "The others will return to the sea when hunger tightens their bellies. The pearl divers, oyster- and lobstermen, fishermen, all of them. They will return to the sea sooner or later, but will they come back safe and sound? What do you think, Geralt? And you, Miss Daven? Your ballad will undoubtedly be interesting: idling on the beach, the witcher watches the children crying over blood-covered boats."

Essi paled even more. She pushed back her circlet, blew on the band as she prepared to retort, but the witcher took her hand before she could open her mouth.

"Enough," he said. "In this outpouring of words, only one thing is really important: you hired my services, Agloval, and I accepted the mission. I will fulfill it if it is feasible."

"I look forward to it," the duke responded in a whisper. "Goodbye. My regards, Miss Daven."

Essi did not bow, only nodded. Hunched over the stones, with his clothing drenched, Agloval left in the direction of the port. Geralt realized then that he still held the poet's hand and that she was not trying to get free. He let go. Regaining her normal colors, Essi turned her face to him.

"It doesn't take much for you to agree to take risks," she said. "A few words on the subject of women and children were enough. And yet we still talk about the insensitivity of witchers, Geralt. Agloval doesn't care about children, women, or the elderly. All that matters to him is that fishing and pearl-diving resumes, because every day off is synonymous with a loss of profit for him. He only has to use starving children as bait for you to agree to risk your life..."

"Essi," he interrupted. "I'm a witcher. Risking my life is my job. Children have nothing to do with it."

"Stop pretending."

"Why should I?"

"If you were really the cold professional you pretend to be, you would have tried to bargain. You didn't even mention money. But enough on that subject. What now?"

"Let's keep walking."

"Gladly. Geralt?"

"Yes..."

"I told you that I was raised by the sea. I can steer a boat..."

"Forget it."

"Why?"

"Forget it," he repeated firmly.

"You could tell me more politely."

"I could, but you would think... ah, devil only knows why. I'm nothing but an insensitive witcher. I risk my life, no-one else's."

Essi clenched her teeth and gave her head a shake. The wind ruffled the wind once more. Her face was covered for a moment by a tangle of golden locks.

"I only wanted to help."

"I know. Thank you."

"Geralt?"

"Yes..."

"What if there's some truth to the rumors concerning Agloval? You know that sirens aren't always friendly. There have been cases..."

"I can't believe that..."

"Sea witches," continued Little-Eye, deep in concentration. "Naiads, tritons, sea nymphs. Who knows what they're capable of. Sh'eenaz had a motive."

"I don't believe it," he interrupted neatly.

"You don't believe it or you don't want to believe it?"

Geralt didn't respond.

"And you try to pass yourself off as a cold professional?" she asked with a strange smile. "As someone whose purpose is driven by the sword? If you want, I'll tell you who you really are."

"I know who I really am."

"You are sensitive," she said softly, "worried to the very depths of your soul. Your stony face and your glacial voice don't fool me. Your sensitivity puts you in fear of raising your sword against an opponent who has a moral advantage over you..."

"No, Essi," he said slowly. "Don't look to me for the subject of a moving ballad: that of the internally conflicted witcher. I might like that to be the case, but it isn't. My code and my training resolve every moral dilemma. In that, I am well prepared."

"Don't say such things!" Essi burst out. "I don't understand why you try to..."

"Essi," he interrupted again, "I don't want you to imagine things about me. I'm not a knight errant."

"You aren't a cold and ruthless killer either."

"No," he answered calmly. "I'm not, contrary to what some people think. It is not my sensitivity and the quality of my character that make me more than that, but the pride, the egotism, and the arrogance of a professional convinced of his valor. Of someone instilled with the belief that the code and cold routine are superior to emotion and prevent him from committing errors, from getting lost in the Manichean maze of Good and Evil, Order and Chaos. No, Essi, the sensitivity is on your part. It's characteristic of your profession, isn't it? You think that the siren appears sympathetic, but you worry that with her pride wounded, she could attack the pearl divers in a desperate act of revenge. At first, you look for justification, extenuating circumstances... You tremble at the idea of a witcher hired by the duke to assassinate a beautiful siren, only because you have succumbed to your emotions. The witcher is deprived of such contradictions, Essi, and of emotions. If it turns out that the siren is to blame, the witcher will not kill her, because his code forbids it. The code resolves all my dilemmas."

Little-Eye lifted her head suddenly and looked at him.

"All your dilemmas?" she asked in a whisper.

She knows about Yennefer, he thought. She knows everything. Dandelion, damned loudmouth...

They looked at one another.

What is hidden in your azure-blue eyes, Essi? Curiosity? Fascination with the 'other?' What are the other sides of your talent, Little-Eye?

"Excuse me," she said. "The question was stupid and naive. It suggested that I believe what you say. Let's go back. The wind cuts me to the marrow of my bones. Looks like the sea is rising."

"I see. You know, Essi, it's interesting..."

"What's interesting?"

"I could have sworn that the rocks where Agloval met the siren were larger and closer to the shore. I don't see them anymore."

"The tide is rising," Essi said. "The water will reach the cliff soon."

"It will rise up the cliff?"

"Yes. The water rises and falls here by more than ten cubits, because the inlet and the estuary are influenced by tidal echoes. That's what the sailors call the phenomenon."

Geralt looked toward the cape and the Dragon's Teeth battered by the foaming waves.

"Essi," he asked, "when does the tide start to recede?"

"Why?"

"Because... That's it, I understand. Yes, you're right. The tide goes out along the line of an underwater plateau."

"The line of what?"

"A sort of plateau formed by the sea floor that emerges like a peak..."

"And the Dragon's Teeth.."

"... are located exactly on the ridge line."

"And will be accessible by wading..."

"How much time will I have?"

"I don't know." Little-Eye's face wrinkled. "You could ask the people here, but I don't think it's the best idea. Look: there are rocks between the shore and the Teeth. The whole bay is riddled with gaps and fjords. At low tide, they form ravines and basins filled with water. I don't know if..."

A splashing sound reached them from the side of the rocks that were barely still visible, and then came a loud modulated cry.

"White-haired one!" called the siren, floating gracefully on the crest of the waves and elegantly lashing the water with her tail.

"Sh'eenaz," replied Geralt, lifting his hand in greeting.

The mermaid swam up to the rocks. She held herself upright in the deep sea foam, drawing her hair back with both hands and presenting in this position all the charms of her chest. Geralt cast an eye toward Essi whose face was slightly flushed. The girl had an expression of regret and embarrassment and looked down at her own charms, forming a ridge under her dress.

"Where is my beloved?" sang Sh'eenaz, coming closer. "He should be here."

"He came, waited for three hours and then left."

"Left?" the siren trilled in surprise. "He didn't wait for me? He could not endure three lousy little hours of waiting? That's what I thought: not an ounce of self-sacrifice! What a monster! And you, what are you doing here, white-haired one? You came to take a walk with your lover? You make a lovely couple. Too bad your legs spoil the sight."

"This isn't my lover. We hardly know each other."

"Is that so?" Sh'eena said, surprised. "That's a pity. You really do make a beautiful couple. Who is she?"

"My name is Essi Daven, I am a poet," sang Little-Eye, modulating her voice in a melodious and expressive air next to which Geralt's inflections sounded like a croak. "I am pleased to meet you, Sh'eenaz."

The young siren struck her hands flat on the water, laughing loudly.

"How beautiful!" she cried. "You know our language! Really, you humans amaze me. We are not so different after all."

The witcher was no less surprised than the siren, though he could have guessed that the girl, more educated than he, would know the Old Tongue, the language of elves that sirens, sea witches, and naiads used in their melodies. He also noticed that the complexity of the melodies that were so difficult for him presented Little-Eye with no major difficulty.

"Sh'eenaz," he said. "Some things do separate us, even if blood flows through us both! Who... Who killed the pearl divers near the two stones? Tell me!"

The siren dived, disturbing the water before reappearing at the surface. Her pretty face suddenly contorted into a terrible grimace:

"Don't tempt fate!" she cried in a shrill voice. "Don't go near the Steps! Not you! Don't enter into conflict with them! Not you!"

"What? Why not us?"

"Not you!" repeated the siren, falling back against the waves.

Water rose up from the splash. They saw her tail once more, her narrow fin spread to strike against the surface of the waves. The siren disappeared into the depths.

Little-Eye smoothed her wind-blown hair. She remained motionless, lost in thought.

"I didn't know," said Geralt, clearing his throat, "that you knew the Old Tongue so well, Essi."

"You couldn't know," she replied with bitterness in her voice. "You hardly know me, isn't that right?"

VI

"Geralt..." Dandelion said, looking around and sniffing the air like a hunting dog. "What is that stench, do you smell it?"

"No, not really..." said the witcher, sniffing. "I've been to smellier places. It's only the smell of the sea."

The bard turned his head to spit between the rocks. The water foamed and churned in the gaps between the stones, revealing sandy ravines washed by the waves.

"Looks like everything is perfectly dry, Geralt. But where did all that water go? How does the tide bloody work? Have you ever asked yourself that?"

"No. I've had other things on my mind."

Dandelion trembled slightly:

"I think the lowest depths of the bloody ocean hide an enormous monster, a revolting scaly beast, a huge toad with horns on its repulsive face. From time to time, he swallows the water along with everything that lives in it: fish, seals, turtles, everything. After he swallows it all, he makes water: that's the tide. What do you think?"

"I think you're a complete idiot. Yennefer explained to me once that the tides are linked to the moon."

"What nonsense! What do the sea and the moon have to do with each other? Only dogs howl at death under the moon. She was mocking you, Geralt, the little liar. I know it wouldn't be the first time, after all."

The witcher did not comment on Dandelion's words. He watched the rocky ravines,

gleaming with moisture after the sea's retreat. The water continued to rise and fall, but it seemed that they would be able to pass.

"Well, time to get to work," he said, rising and adjusting the sword carried on his shoulder. "We can't wait around for high tide. Dandelion, you still insist on going with me?"

"Yes. Subjects for ballads don't lie around like pine cones under a Christmas tree. Besides, it's Doll's birthday tomorrow."

"I don't see the connection."

"Pity. We, the normal people, are in the habit of giving gifts at birthdays. Since we don't have the money to buy something, I'll find something at the bottom of the sea."

"A herring? A cuttlefish?"

"You can be such an idiot. I'll find amber, a seahorse, or perhaps a pretty shell. It's the symbol that's important: a sign of thoughtfulness and affection. I like Little-Eye and I want to make her happy. Don't you understand that? That's what I thought. Come on. You first, because a monster could strike at any instant."

"Fine." The witcher descended the stone wall covered with slimy algae. "I go in front to protect you from harm. That will be my sign of thoughtfulness and affection. Just remember: if I shout, run for your life and don't get in the way of my sword. We're not here to look for seahorses, but to size up a killer monster."

They descended to the bottom of the ravine, at times paddling through the water in the cracks and pools filled with sand and seaweed. To improve the situation, it began to rain: Geralt and Dandelion were soon soaked from head to toe. The troubadour was constantly stopping to search the sand and seaweed with a stick.

"Oh, look, Geralt, a fish. Completely red, by the devil. And here, a little eel. And that? What's this? It looks like a translucent louse. And this... Oh my!

Geralt!"

The witcher turned abruptly, his hand moving to the hilt of his sword.

It was a human skull, white, polished by sand, embedded in a crack filled with sand. Dandelion trembled at the sight of an annelid wriggling in the eye socket and gave an unpleasant cry. The witcher shrugged and led the way to the stone platform unveiled by the waves. Ahead, the two Dragon's Teeth were as imposing as mountains. He watched cautiously. The ground was littered with sea cucumbers, shells and seaweed. In the puddles and potholes large jellyfish waved and echinoderms undulated. Small crabs as colorful as hummingbirds flew by, waving their legs.

In the distance Geralt saw a corpse, lying among the stones. The ribcage of the drowned man, infected by crabs inside and out, moved strangely from the algae. The corpse could not have been there for more than a day, but the crabs had already shredded it so that any closer visual inspection would produce nothing conclusive. The witcher, without a word, veered to avoid the corpse. Dandelion didn't notice.

"It stinks of decay," he said, joining Geralt. Dandelion spat, wringing his drenched hat. "And it's pouring rain. It's cold. I'll catch cold and lose my voice, damn it..."

"Stop complaining. If you want to go back, all you have to do is follow our footsteps."

Behind the base of the Dragon's Teeth lay a limestone plateau ending in a pit that opened onto the tranquil waves of the sea: the tide's edge.

Dandelion looked around them.

"Ah, witcher! Your monster has enough sense to retire to sea with the tide. You must have thought he would wait belly-up for you to come along and gut him."

"Shut up."

The witcher approached the edge of the plateau and knelt carefully while holding the tapered shells that covered the rock. He saw nothing. The water was dark and its surface disturbed and opaque from the drizzle.

Dandelion entered one of the recesses in the stone, pushing the most insistent crabs with his foot; he looked around and ran his fingers over the walls, dripping with water and covered with loose algae and rugged colonies of shellfish and mussels.

"Hey, Geralt!"

"What?"

"Look at these shells. They're pearl mussels, aren't they?"

"No."

"Would you know?"

"No."

"Then wait until you know more before forming an opinion. They are pearl mussels, I'm sure. I'll gather some pearls. At least our expedition will bring us some profits, not just a vicious cold. Right, Geralt?"

"Gather away. The monster attacks pearl divers. Collectors fall in the same category."

"You want me to act as bait?"

"Go on, gather away. Take the larger shells. If they don't contain any pearls, we can always use them for soup."

"And what then? I only want the pearls... The shells can go to hell... Plague take it! How the hell do you open these? Don't you have a knife, Geralt?"

"You don't even have a knife with you?"

"I'm a poet, not a cut-throat. Oh, nevermind, I'll put them in my bag; we'll get the pearls out later. Hey, you! Get out of my way!"

The crab caught by Dandelion's kick flew over Geralt's head and plunged into a wave.

Intrigued by the black mass of water, the witcher slowly followed the edge of the plateau. He heard Dandelion pounding the stone to detach the mussels.

"Dandelion! Come here, look!"

Broken, the plateau ended abruptly at a right angle and fell into the sea. Beneath the surface of the water, one could distinctly see large blocks of marble, sides covered with algae, molluscs, and sea anemones waving in their aquatic element like flowers in the wind.

"What is it? It looks like a staircase."

"It is a staircase," Dandelion whispered, impressed. "Yes. It's a staircase that leads to an underwater city... Just like the legendary Ys that was submerged by the waves. Have you heard the legend of the city of the abyss: Ys-on-the-Water? I'll write a beautiful ballad that will make my rivals green with envy. I must see all of this... Look, there's a sort of mosaic... Something is engraved or molded. Writing? Move over."

"Dandelion! Careful of the depths! You'll slip..."

"Of course I won't! In any case, I'm already soaked. Look, it's shallow... On the first step, the water is barely waist-deep. And it's as wide as a ballroom. Oh, damn!"

Geralt jumped instantly into the water to grab Dandelion by the neck.

"I slipped on this shit," Dandelion explained breathlessly, holding between his hands a slender and flat molded shell that was cobalt blue and covered in algae. "They're all over the stairs. The color is beautiful, don't you think? Hey, put it in your bag: mine is already full."

"Get out of here now!" the witcher roared furiously. "Get back on the plateau, Dandelion. This isn't a game."

"Quiet. Did you hear something? What was that?"

Geralt had heard. The sound came from below, from the depths of the water. It had been dull and deep, but short, fleeting, barely perceptible, like the sound of a bell.

"A bell, by the Beard..." murmured Dandelion, moving up to the plateau. "I was right, Geralt, it's the bell of Ys under the water, the bell of the city of ghosts whose sound is muffled by the elemental water. It reminds us of damnation..."

"Shut it, okay?"

The sound came again, closer.

"... reminds us," the bard continued, squeezing the tails of his coat, "of our terrible fate. That bell sounds like a warning..."

The witcher stopped paying attention to Dandelion's voice to focus his sixth sense. He felt something, or rather the presence of something.

"It's a warning..." Dandelion stuck his tongue out slightly, a sign of artistic concentration. "A warning that... um... we do not forget... um... um... That's it, I have it!"

The heart of the bell is deaf, it is the song of death that you hear

O death, easier to face than to forget...

The water exploded next to the witcher. Dandelion screamed. From the foam arose a bulging-eyed monster about to strike Geralt with a sharp and toothed instrument, resembling a scythe. Geralt had seized his sword as soon as the water began to swell. Whirling, he cut the loose, scaled neck of the monster. The witcher turned just in time to see another creature rise out of the water under a strange helmet and wearing something resembling a copper breastplate covered in verdigris. With a broad stroke of his sword,

Geralt struck the point of the short pike wielded against him and, using his momentum, struck the toothed jaws of the ichthyosaur and leapt back toward the edge of the platform with a splash.

"Run for it, Dandelion!"

"Give me your hand!"

"Run, damn it!"

The next creature appeared in the waves with a hiss, a bloody sword grasped in a rough green paw. The muscles of the witcher's back gave a twitch away from the edge of the shell-studded plateau and allowed him to take position. The fish-eyed creature, however, remained motionless. The same size as Geralt, the water came up to its waist, but an imposing crest bristled on its head and the gills were wide open, giving the impression that it was larger. The grimace drawn across its toothed face resembled nothing so much as a cruel smile.

Paying no attention to the two corpses that floated in the red water, the creature brandished its sword, holding the guardless hilt in both hands. Bristling its beautiful crest and its gills, it skillfully twirled its blade through the air. Gerald heard the hiss and the hum of the weapon.

The creature took a step forward, forming a wave that crashed against the witcher. Geralt's sword whirled and hissed in response, and stepped forward, in turn, raising the challenge.

The long nimble fingers of the fish-eyed creature shifted on the hilt of the sword. The creature lowered shoulders that were protected by copper and scales, and immersed itself up to its chest, concealing its weapon below the water. The witcher gripped his sword with both hands - the right under the guard and the left near the pommel - and raised it slightly to the side, above his right shoulder. He locked eyes with the monster, but the opalescent fish eyes only offered a teardrop-shaped iris, polished and cold like metal, expressing and betraying nothing. Not even the intention of an attack.

From the depths at the bottom of the staircase came the sound of the abyssal bells, more distinctly and increasingly close.

The fish-eyed monster surged forward and brandished its sword above the water. It attacked to the side and down, much more rapidly than expected. Geralt was lucky: he had predicted that the blow would come from the right. He parried with a downward movement, twisting his body and turning the sword so that the flat of the blade blocked the sword of his adversary. At that moment, everything depended on the speed with which each of them could move from a static block to an offensive stance with a shift of the fingers on the hilt of his

sword. Each of the fighters, ready to deal the decisive blow, had their weight on the right foot. Geralt knew that they were equally fast.

But the fish-eyed creature had a longer reach.

The witcher dealt a sideways blow to the haunch and, executing a sharp turn to parry his opponent's blade, easily avoided the wild and desperate swing that the monster returned out of desperation. Without making a sound, it opened its fish-mouth before disappearing beneath the red-brown haze that was suspended in the water.

"Give me your hand, quick!" Dandelion yelled. "More are swimming toward us! I see them!"

Seizing the bard's right hand, the witcher came out of the water and climbed onto the stone plateau. Behind him, a huge wave appeared.

The first sign of the tide.

They quickly fled before the rising water. Geralt turned and saw a number of other underwater creatures emerge from the sea and join in pursuit, leaping agilely on their strong legs. Without a word, he quickened his pace.

Having difficulty with the water that reached his knees, Dandelion was panting. Suddenly he stumbled and fell. Holding himself up on his

trembling hands, the troubadour floundered in the kelp. Seizing his belt, the witcher pulled him out of the foaming water.

"Run!" he cried. "I'll stop them!"

"Geralt!"

"Run, Dandelion! The water will close the gap and we won't be able to get away! Run for your life!"

Dandelion groaned before starting to run again. The witcher followed him, hoping that the monsters would give up the pursuit. Against all of them, he didn't have a chance.

The creatures caught up at the edge of the fault, because the water strongly favored swimming while the witcher, clinging to the slippery rocks, progressed with more and more difficulty through the churning water. Geralt stopped in the basin where Dandelion had found the skull.

He stopped and turned, trying to recover his composure.

The point of his sword pierced the first in the temple and ripped through the second, which was wielding a sort of hatchet. The third fled.

The witcher tried then to hurry up the ravine, but the swirl of an explosive wave filled the chasm with a crash, tearing at the rocks and pulling him down in its undertow. Colliding with one of the sea creatures, Geralt kicked at it. Something grabbed him by the legs and dragged him toward the depths. His shoulder struck against the rock; the witcher opened his eyes just in time to see the dark outline of his attackers and two quick flashes. He parried the first with his sword and instinctively blocked the second with his left hand. Geralt felt a shock and pain, then the aggressive irritation of salt. He kicked off from the bottom with his feet. Swimming to the surface, he drew the Sign with his fingers. The muffled explosion pierced his eardrums. If I get through this alive, he thought, striking the water with his hands and feet, if I make it through this, I'll go see Yen Vengerberg, try to do something else... If I get out alive...

He thought he heard the sound of a trumpet or a horn.

The wave that exploded anew into the shaft threw him face-down onto a large rock. Geralt distinctly heard the horn now, and the screams of Dandelion, reaching him from all directions at once. Snorting salt water from his nose, he looked around himself, pushing the wet hair from his face.

The witcher found himself at the point where they began their excursion. Flat on his stomach on the pebbles. All around, the surf was producing white foam.

Behind him, in the ravine that had in the meantime expanded into a bay, a gray

dolphin danced on the waves. The young siren was riding on its back, her celadon hair windblown. Her breasts were magnificent.

"White-haired one!" she sang, signaling with a hand that held a long spiral shell. "Are you alive?"

"I'm alive," the witcher said, astonished.

The foam around him was becoming pink. The salt on his rigid left shoulder stung intensely. The sleeves of his jacket had been shredded. Blood was flowing. / got out, he thought. / made it again. But no, I will never find her.

He saw Dandelion approaching at a run over the wet rocks.

"I've stopped them," sang the siren before blowing again into her conch shell. "But not for long! Run and don't come back, white-haired one! The sea... It's not for you!"

"I know," he shouted back. "I know. Thank you, Sh'eenaz!"

VII

"Dandelion," asked Little-Eye, using her teeth to tear the end of the bandage while she pressed the knot against the witcher's wrist. "Can you explain

where all those shells packed under the stair came from? Drouhard's wife is doing the housework and she doesn't know what to think."

"Shells?" Dandelion sounded surprised. "What shells? I have no idea. Perhaps ducks dropped them on their migration home?"

Geralt hid his smile in the shadows. He remembered swearing his silence to Dandelion, who spent the whole afternoon opening the shells and digging out the slimy meat. He injured his finger and tore his shirt without finding a single pearl. No surprise there, since there was no chance that they were pearl mussels. The idea of making soup was immediately rejected after opening the first mussel, the appearance of which was so repulsive and the smell so strong that they had tears in their eyes.

Little-Eye finished Geralt's bandage and sat on the side of the tub. He thanked the girl, inspecting his skillfully bandaged hands. The wound was deep and long enough to reach his elbow; the witcher suffered with each movement. The wound had been temporarily dressed by the sea, but before they could return home, it had started to bleed again. Just before the girl's arrival, Geralt had applied to his forearm an elixir to promote blood clotting and numb the pain. Essi found him in the process of trying, with Dandelion's help, to stitch the wound with fishing line. Essi cursed at them and took over dressing the wounds. Meanwhile, Dandelion recounted the story of the battle, repeating several times that he reserved the exclusive rights to the ballad of the events. Essi, of course, inundated the witcher with questions that he could not answer. She reacted very badly to what she considered an effort to hide something. She became sullen and stopped asking questions.

"Agloval already knows everything," she said. "You were seen going home, and Drouhard's wife went to tell everyone that she had seen blood on the stairs. Everyone rushed to the rocks in hopes of seeing corpses washed ashore by the waves. They're still looking, but I understand that they've found nothing."

"And they will find nothing," the witcher said. "I'll pay a visit to Agloval tomorrow. Ask him, if you can, to stop people from going near the Dragon's Teeth until further notice. But take care not to say a word about this

staircase and Dandelion's fantasies about the city of Ys. The treasure-hunters would flock to it in droves and we would have many more corpses on our hands..."

"I'm not a gossip." Essi pouted, forcefully pushing the circlet back on her forehead.

"If I ask you something, it's not so that I can run and disclose everything like a washerwoman."

"I'm sorry."

"I have to go out," Dandelion informed them. "I have an appointment with Akeretta. Geralt, I'm taking your jacket, because mine is still dirty and wet."

"Everything is wet here," Little-Eye remarked mockingly, giving the pile of clothes on the ground a vengeful kick with her boot. "How could you? We need to hang the clothesline, dry it properly... You're terrible."

"It will dry out well enough on its own."

Dandelion extracted the witcher's wet jacket and admired the silver studs riveted to the sleeves.

"Stop talking nonsense! And that, what is that? Oh no! The bag is still filled with mud and seaweed! And what is that? Ugh!"

Geralt and Dandelion looked silently at the cobalt blue shell that Essi held in both hands. They had forgotten its existence. The mold that coated it stank horribly.

"It's a gift," said the troubadour, backing toward the door. "Tomorrow, it's your birthday, isn't it, Doll? Well, it's your present."

"It?"

"It's beautiful, eh?" Dandelion sniffed before adding quickly: "On behalf of Geralt. He's the one who chose it. Oh... It's getting late. Farewell..."

Little-Eye was silent for a moment after Dandelion left. The witcher looked at the foul-smelling shell, blushing with shame at the troubadour's attitude and his own.

"You remembered my birthday?" Essi asked, formulating each word carefully and holding the shell as far from herself as possible. "Really?"

"Give me that," he replied sharply. Geralt got up from his mattress, protecting his bandaged hand. "I beg your pardon for that idiot..."

"But no," she protested, seizing the small knife that was hanging from her belt. "It's a very beautiful shell that I want to keep as a souvenir. I just need to clean it and get rid of... whatever it contains. I'll throw it out the window for the cats."

Something struck the floor, bouncing. Geralt widened his eyes and saw the thing in front of Essi.

It was a pearl. A perfectly opalescent and polished azure-blue pearl, big as a swollen pea.

"By the gods..." Little-Eye saw it in turn. "Geralt... a pearl!"

"A pearl," he repeated, laughing. "You will still get a present, Essi. I'm glad."

"Geralt, I can't accept it. This pearl is worth at least..."

"It's yours," he interrupted. "Even if he is an idiot, Dandelion really thought about your birthday. He kept saying that he wanted to please you. And so, fate has had its way."

"And you, Geralt?"

"Me?"

"Do you also want to please me? This pearl is so beautiful... It must be very valuable... You don't regret it?"

"I'm glad that you're pleased. And if I regret anything... it's that there is only one. And..."

"Yes?"

"And that I haven't known you as long as Dandelion. I didn't know the date of your birthday. I wish I could give you gifts and make you happy... and call you Doll."

She threw herself violently on his neck. Geralt had anticipated the movement, turning his head for a cool kiss on the cheek. He hugged her gently but with some reservation. He felt the girl's body stiffen and slowly withdraw, but no farther than the length of the arms she was

always resting on her shoulders. He knew what she wanted, but he did not meet her expectations: he was not attracted to her.

Essi released him then and turned toward the dirty window, which was ajar.

"Of course," she said abruptly. "You hardly know me. I forgot..."

"Essi," he replied after a moment of silence. "I..."

"I hardly know you either," she exploded, interrupting him. "So what? I love you. I can't do anything about that. Not a thing."

"Essi!"

"Yes, I love you, Geralt. It doesn't matter to me what you think. I loved you from the moment I saw you in the wedding hall."

The poet bowed her head in silence.

She stood right before him; Geralt was sorry that she was not the fish-eyed creature hiding its sword under the water; with it, at least, he had a fighting chance.

"You have nothing to say," she said. "Nothing, not a word."

I'm tired, he thought, and terribly weak. I need to sit down; my vision is foggy; I've lost some blood; and I haven't eaten anything... I need to sit down. Damn bedroom... May it burn to the ground in a thunderstorm. No furniture; if there were at least two stupid chairs and a table we could share and converse easily and hold hands in safety. I am condemned to sit on a mattress and ask her to do the same. Nothing is more dangerous than a mattress stuffed with straw into which one sinks and has his movements too restricted to dodge...

"Sit next to me, Essi."

The girl joined him on the mattress, hesitantly and with some delay, far from him. Too far.

"When I heard," she murmured, breaking the silence, "that Dandelion dragged you back covered in blood, I left the house like a madwoman; I was in shock, I ran blindly. And then... you know what I thought? That it was magic; that you had secretly cast a spell; that you had charmed me with unfair means; your sign, your wOLF s-head medallion, your evil eye. That's what I thought, but I didn't stop running, because I knew then that I accepted... that I surrendered to the influence of your power. But the reality proved to be even worse. You didn't cast anything of the sort, Geralt; you didn't use any spell to seduce me. Why? Why haven't you bewitched me?"

The witcher was silent.

"If it was nothing but magic," she continued, "the situation would be simple and easy to resolve. I would submit, happily, to your power. But then... then I... I don't know what is happening to me..."

By the devil, he thought, if, when she is with me, Yennefer feels exactly what I'm feeling now, I sympathize with her plight. I'll never be surprised by her reactions; I'll never hate them... never.

I expected of Yennefer - as is expected of me now - that the impossible be achieved: something even more impossible than the liaison between Agloval and Sh'eenaz. Yennefer had the deep conviction that a little dedication was not enough; and that our situation called for a sacrifice over

and over again, without any guarantee that it would be enough. No, I will no longer blame Yennefer for being unable and unwilling to give me a little bit of attention. I know now that the smallest trace is as heavy as gold.

"Geralt," moaned Little-Eye, laying her head on his shoulder. "I am so ashamed of my powerlessness: a sort of supernatural fever, preventing me from breathing freely..."

Geralt continued to hold his silence.

"I always thought that it was a sublime and wonderful state of mind; dignified even in disappointment. But love is only vegetative, Geralt, horribly and banally vegetative. It's the state of someone who succumbs to illness, who takes poison. Because, like the one who is

poisoned, the lover is desperate to get any antidote. At all. Even humiliation."

"Essi, I beg you."

"I feel humiliated by the object of my desires, and shamefully condemned to suffer in silence. I am ashamed to have embarrassed you, but I could not do otherwise. Helpless before the fate that afflicts me, it is as if I am sick; completely subject to an external grace. Diseases have always horrified me; they cause feebleness, confusion and loneliness. The disease is that we may go into remission."

Geralt did not open his mouth.

"I should," she moaned again, "be grateful that you don't try to take advantage of the situation. But this is not the case. I am ashamed of that too. I hate your silence and your eyes dilated with fear. I hate you... for your silence, your sincerity, your... Her too, I hate her, the sorceress; I would gladly settle things with her using my knife... I hate her. Order me to leave, Geralt, because I can't bring myself to do that on my own, and yet that is what I want: to leave, go to the town, go to the hostel. I want revenge on you for the shame I feel, my humiliation... I'll take the first opportunity..."

Damn, he thought, hearing her voice sink like a ball of rags tumbling down a staircase. She will start to cry, for sure. Then what, plague take it, what will I do?

Essi's hunched shoulders trembled like a leaf. The girl turned her head to weep without sobbing in a strangely silent and peaceful way.

I feel nothing at all, he thought with terror. Not the slightest emotion. If I hold her in my arms now, it will be a premeditated gesture, calculated, without spontaneity. I'm going to embrace her, not because I have any desire to, but because I feel that it's necessary. I don't feel any emotion.

When he embraced her shoulders, she stopped crying and dried her tears, shaking her head sharply. She turned so that he would not see her face and then her head fell heavily onto Geralt's chest.

A little dedication, he thought, it would only take a little... It would calm her down: an embrace, a kiss, a hug... She wants nothing more... And even if it is not enough, what's the difference? A little dedication and attention: she is beautiful and worthy of that much... If she wants more... It will calm her down. Making love gently, peacefully, in silence. But me... It's all the same to me, because Essi smells of verbena, not of lilac and gooseberry; she doesn't have cold and electrifying skin; Essi's hair is not a black tornado of shiny curls; Essi's eyes are beautiful, sweet, hot and blue, but they are no deep purple, cold and dispassionate. Essi will fall asleep afterward, will turn her face and part her lips; Essi will not smile in triumph. Because Essi...

Essi is not Yennefer.

That's why I can't grant her even a little dedication.

"Please, Essi, don't cry."

"Yes..." She moved away from him very slowly. "Yes... I understand. It can't be helped."

They sat in silence, seated beside one another on the bench of hay. Night was falling.

"Geralt," she said suddenly, in a voice that trembled. "Perhaps... as with this shell, this strange gift... we could find a pearl in our relationship? Later? After a while?"

"I see this pearl," he finally said with effort, "set in silver, a flower of finely-chiseled silver petals. I see it hanging around your neck on a chain, worn as I wear this medallion. It will be your talisman, Essi. A talisman that will protect you from every kind of evil."

"My talisman," she repeated, lowering her head. "A pearl trapped in silver just as I will never be free, myself. My jewel, my substitute. Can a talisman like that bring good luck?"

"Yes, Essi. Be sure of it."

"Can I keep sitting with you?"

"You can."

Sunset was approaching. Darkness was falling little by little. They stayed together, positioned next to each other on a mattress filled with straw in an attic room, devoid of furniture, with only an unlit candle stuck in a cold puddle of wax.

They sat in silence for a long time. Then Dandelion returned. They heard his footsteps, the strains of his lute and his humming. In the room, Dandelion noticed their presence without saying a word. Essi didn't say anything either. She stood and walked out without looking at them.

Dandelion made no comment, but the witcher saw in his eyes the words he didn't say.

VIII

"An intelligent race," repeated Agloval, lost in thought, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair and his chin on his fists. "An underwater civilization. Ichtyoide creatures living at the bottom of the sea. A staircase

leading into the depths. Geralt, do you take me for the most naive of dukes?"

Little-Eye, standing next to Dandelion, snorted angrily. Dandelion shook his head nervously. Geralt was a statue.

"It's all the same to me whether you believe me or not. My duty is to warn you. The boats sailing in the area and the people who approach the Dragon's Teeth at low tide are in mortal danger. If you want to verify my statements; if you want to take that risk: it's your business. I'm only giving you fair warning."

"Ah!" Zelest intervened suddenly. The steward was sitting behind Agloval in a windowed alcove. "If these are monsters like elves or goblins, then they're not dangerous. My fear is of the greater monster: sorcery. From what the witcher said, they are like ghosts of the watery depths. We can overcome ghosts. A story recently reached my ears about a magician who killed the ghosts of Lake Mokva in the blink of an eye. He threw a barrel of magic potion into the water: the ghosts were done for. Not a trace left."

"That's right," interrupted Drouhard, who until then had remained silent. "It didn't leave a trace... But the bream, pike, crayfish and mussels suffered the same fate; just like the weeds at the bottom; even the nearby alders dried up."

"Marvelous," Agloval commented drily. "Thank you for that brilliant idea, Zelest. Do you have any others?"

"That's right... That's right..." the steward continued, growing a deep red. "The magician overdid it a bit, he went a little too far. But I will succeed without a magician, Duke. The witcher said that it's possible to fight and kill the monsters. Then it's a war, my lord. Like the old days. Nothing new for us! Dwarves lived in the mountains. Where are they now? Elvish savages and malevolent fairies can still be found in the forests, but they too will be done for soon. We must defend our land as our ancestors did..."

"And only my grandchildren will see the color of pearls once more?" interrupted the duke with a grimace. "We don't have time, Zelest."

"It will be easy. I say: for each boat of fishermen, two boats of archers. The monsters will see reason, learn fear. Isn't that right, master witcher?"

Geralt looked at him coldly without responding.

Agloval exposed his most noble profile, turning his head and biting his lips, then turned his gaze on the witcher, blinking and frowning.

"You have not completed your mission, Geralt..." he said. "You have once again

wasted the opportunity to do well. It is true that you have shown some good will, I don't deny that. But I am not paying you for good will; it's the result I pay for. It is the effectiveness that interests me, witcher, and your effectiveness is in fact, pardon the term, pathetic."

"Well said, my dear duke!" Dandelion cut in mockingly. "It's just a pity that you weren't with us at the Dragon's Teeth. We, the witcher and myself, would have granted you the opportunity to meet one of the creatures surging from the sea with sword in hand. Then you would understand what the situation is and stop dithering about the payment you owe..."

"Like a fish-merchant," said Little-Eye.

"I'm not in the habit of dithering, bargaining or arguing," Agloval replied calmly. "I said that I will not give you a cent, Geralt. Our contract was in effect: remove the threat, eliminate the danger, make pearl diving safe. And what do you do? You tell me a romantic story about an intelligent race living at the bottom of the sea. You advise me to stay as far as possible from the place where my resources are gathered. What have you really done? You will have killed... how many, by the way?"

"Their number is not important," Geralt responded, paling slightly. "For you at least, Agloval."

"Precisely, and there is not even any evidence. If at least you had brought me the right hand of one of these fish-frogs, perhaps I would have given

you the usual compensation for my ranger when he brings me a few pairs of wolf ears."

"Well," the witcher said coldly, "there is nothing left for me to do but bid you farewell."

"You are mistaken," said the duke. "I propose a full-time job with an honest salary: captain of the armored guard that will now protect the fishermen. This is not a position for life; you can leave once this intelligent race knows to stay away from my people. What do you think?"

"Thank you, but I'm not interested," the witcher replied with a grimace. "Such work doesn't suit me. I believe that waging war against another race is idiotic. It may perhaps be an ideal activity for a bored and idle duke, but not for me."

"Oh, but that's grand!" Agloval cried with a laugh. "That's just sublime! You reject my offer of a job fit for a king! You renounce, with the air of a rich man after a feast, a very handsome sum of money. Geralt, have you eaten anything today? No? And tomorrow? And the day after? Your options are dwindling, witcher. It is difficult to make a living under ordinary circumstances, let alone with an arm in a sling..."

"How dare you!" Little-Eye yelled. "How dare you speak to him in that tone, Agloval? The arm he carries in a sling was injured during a mission that you yourself ordered! How can you behave in such a petty way?"

"Stop," interrupted Geralt. "Stop, Essi. There's no point."

"Wrong," she replied with anger. "There is a point. Someone must finally tell the truth to the duke who owes his title to the fact that no-one wanted, aside from him, to reign over this tiny rock in the sea, and who thinks he is in any position to humiliate others."

Agloval clenched his teeth, reddening, but remained silent.

"Yes, Agloval," continued Essi, "you take pleasure in belittling your fellows; you love to look down on someone like the witcher who was ready

to die for your money. But you should know that the witcher doesn't care about your scorn and your insults; that they don't make any impression on him at all; that he does not even take them into consideration. The witcher doesn't even feel what your servants and subjects, Zelest and Drouhard, must feel: a deep and gnawing shame. The witcher doesn't feel what we, Dandelion and myself, feel in your sight: disgust. Do you know, Agloval, why that is? I'll tell you: because the witcher knows that he's better than you, that he is worth a thousand of you. That is what gives him his strength."

Essi stopped. She looked down quickly so that Geralt would not have time to notice the tears beading at the corner of her beautiful eye. The girl brought her hand to the flower of silver petals at her neck, in the center of which was set an azure-blue pearl. The latticed petals of the mysterious flower had been carved by a master jeweler worthy of the title. The witcher was pleased with the quality of the craftsman hired by Drouhard, who had paid for everything without requiring reimbursement.

"Therefore, my lord duke," Little-Eye said, lifting her head, "do not insult the witcher by offering a position as a mercenary in the army that you want to raise against the ocean. Do not embarrass yourself by presenting a proposition that can only provoke laughter. Have you figured it out yet? You can hire the services of a witcher for a particular mission, to protect people from harm or threat; but you cannot buy a witcher and use him for your own purposes. Because a witcher, even injured and hungry, will always be better than you. That is why he spurns your miserable job. Do you understand?"

"No, Miss Daven," Agloval replied coldly. "I don't understand. On the contrary, I understand less and less. The first thing that I don't understand is why I have not yet ordered that all three of you be drawn and quartered, or certainly beaten and branded with a red-hot iron. You, Miss Daven, you try to convince us that you know everything, but then tell me why I should spare you?"

"But of course, right away," the poet responded tit for tat. "It is because deep down, Agloval, in your heart, there is still a spark of dignity, a remaining trace of honor that the arrogance of the nouveau riche miscreant

has not snuffed out. Deep down, Agloval: in the deepest place in your heart you are still capable of loving a mermaid."

Agloval, white as a sheet, wiped his sweaty hands on the arms of his chair. Bravo, thought the witcher, bravo, Essi. You are brilliant. But he also felt tired, terribly tired.

"Get out," Agloval ordered dully. "Be on your way. Go where you like. Leave me alone."

"Farewell, duke," said Essi. "Before I go, accept one more piece of advice, something that the witcher should tell you, but I don't want him to forget. I will do so in his place."

"I'm listening."

"The ocean is vast, Agloval. No-one yet knows what the horizon hides, if it does hide something. The ocean is larger than the largest of the wild forests from which you drove the elves. It is more difficult to cross than any mountain or valley where you massacred the dwarves. At the bottom of the ocean lives a race outfitted with cuirasses, one that knows the secrets of forging metal. Be careful, Agloval. If the archers begin to accompany the fishermen, you will start a war against an enemy that you do not know. What you start could turn out to be a nest of hornets. I advise you, therefore, to give the sea to them, because the sea is not for you. You do not know and you will never know where the steps lead that descend into the depths from the Dragon's Teeth."

"You are mistaken, Miss Essi," Agloval said quietly. "We know where the staircase leads. Even better: we will follow them, these Steps. We will discover what can be found on the other side of the ocean, if there is anything to be found. And we will take from this ocean all that we are able to take. If we are not capable, our children or our children's children will be. It is a matter of time. That is our undertaking, if we must fill the ocean with blood. Understand this, Essi, wise Essi, you who write in your ballads the chronicle of humanity. Life is not a ballad, poor girl, little poet with her charming eye blinded by the beauty of her own words. Life is a battle, as the witchers, in their superiority over us, have learned. It is they who have

led the way, who have carved the path and littered it with the corpses of those who have crossed the path of humanity. It is they who, with us, defend the world. We, Essi, we only continue this fight. It is we, not your ballads, who will create the chronicle of humanity. We have never needed witchers more, because from now on nothing will stop us.

Nothing."

Essi paled and puffed on her circlet, violently shaking her head.

"Nothing at all, Agloval?"

"Nothing, Essi."

The poet smiled.

A sudden commotion filled the antechamber: the sound of footsteps and shouts. Paiges and guards burst into the room. They knelt and bowed, forming a hedge.

Sh'eenaz appeared in the doorway, wearing a sea-blue dress adorned with frills white as foam. A dizzying décolletage revealed the siren's charms, partially hidden and adorned by a collar of nephrite and lapis-lazuli worthy of admiration. Her celadon-green hair curled artfully and was retained by a tiara of coral and magnificent pearls.

"Sh'eenaz..." stammered Agloval, falling to his knees. "My... Sh'eenaz..."

The siren entered slowly with a stride that was light and graceful, as fluid as a wave. She stopped in front of the duke and, with a smile that displayed all her little white teeth, seized the dress in her small hands and lifted it high enough that everyone could see for himself the quality of work performed by the sea-witch. Geralt swallowed. The witch knew what nice legs were, obviously, and how to fashion them.

"Ah!" exclaimed Dandelion. "My ballad... That's exactly what I wrote in my ballad... For him, she traded her tail for legs, but she also lost her voice!"

"I haven't lost anything," Sh'eenaz declared, singing these words in the common tongue. "For the moment. I feel brand new after that procedure."

"You speak our language?"

"So what, is it forbidden? How are you, white-haired one? Oh, I see that your beloved is here also... Essi Daven, if I recall correctly. Do you know her a little better or still just barely?"

"Sh'eenaz..." Agloval stammered insistently, approaching her on his knees. "My love! My dear... my only... At last, you decided... At last, Sh'eenaz!"

With a distinguished gesture, the siren offered her hand to kiss.

"Ah yes, because I love you too, idiot. What kind of lover is incapable of a little dedication?"

IX

Their departure from Bremervoord took place with a fresh morning mist veiling the intensity of the disc of the sun that appeared on the horizon. They had decided to leave as a trio, but without real discussion and without a common goal, wanting simply to stay together for a while longer.

They left the rocky cape, bidding farewell to the cliffs carved by the surf and jutting vertically from the beach, the strange limestone formations lapped by the wind and waves. Upon entering the green and floral valley of Dol Adalatte, the scent of the sea, the crash of surf and the savage cries of seagulls still remained in their nostrils and their ears.

The talkative Dandelion kept jumping from subject to subject: the country of Bars and its idiotic custom of forcing young girls to remain virgins until marriage; the iron birds of the island of Inis Porhoet; the water of life and the water of death; the taste and the narcotic properties of the sapphire wine called cill; the royal quadruplets of Ebbing, dubbed with the quarrelsome names of Putzi, Gritzi, Mitzi, and Juan Pablo Vassermiller. He also criticized the new trends in music and poetry started by his competitors, poor specimens, he said, without a true artist among them.

Geralt kept his silence. Essi, too, was quiet or only responded with partial words. The witcher felt and avoided the look she cast toward him.

They crossed the Adalatte river on a ferry whose rope they had to tow themselves as the ferryman, white as a sheet and lost in a state of inebriation approaching epilepsy, could not release the mooring post that he held in both hands and responded systematically to all questions put to him with an inexpressive "beuh."

The country on the other side of the Adalatte pleased the witcher. The villagers situated along the river were for the most part circled by fences, suggesting that there would be work for him.

Earlier that afternoon, enjoying a break - they left Dandelion watching the horses while they drank - Essi approached Geralt without warning.

"Geralt," she said softly. "I... I can't stand it. It's more than I can bear."

The witcher tried to avoid her gaze, but she would not let him escape. Essi toyed with the azure pearl set in the silver flower that was suspended around her neck. Geralt regretted anew that she was not the fish-eyed monster hiding its sword beneath the water instead.

"Geralt... We must resolve this problem, mustn't we?"

She waited for his response: a word, just one, the slightest hint of a reaction. But the witcher knew that he had nothing that he could dedicate to her and did not want to lie to her. In fact, he didn't dare tell the truth for fear of hurting her.

Dandelion, ever-reliable Dandelion with his habitual tact, at last salvaged the situation by appearing suddenly.

"Yes, that's right!" he yelled, plunging a stick into the water to scatter the rushes and enormous river-nettles. "You really have to make a decision, it's about time! I don't want to watch the act you're putting on any longer! What are you waiting for from him, Doll? Something impossible? And you, Geralt, what do you expect? That Little-Eye read your thoughts like... yes,

like the other one? And that she content herself with the situation you're comfortable with, where, without divulging your emotions, you are required to give neither explanation nor refusal? How long will it take you to hear? When do you plan to understand? In how many years? In the form of distant memories? Tomorrow, we part ways, by the devil! Oh, I've had enough of you two. Listen: I'll cut myself a hazel branch to fish with, and you, meanwhile, will have time for everything you have to say. Say it all! Try to come to a mutual understanding. It's not as difficult as you think. Then, by all the gods, do it. Do it with him, Doll. Do it with her, Geralt, and be good for her. And then, by the plague, either move on or..."

Dandelion turned violently on his heel, breaking a bulrush and swearing. He planned to fish until nightfall with a horse hair mounted to a hazel branch.

When he disappeared, Geralt and Essi remained motionless for a long moment, leaning against the trunk of a willow tree overlooking the stream. They were silent, hand in hand. Then the witcher began to talk at length and in a low voice; Little-Eye listened with tears in her eyes.

Then they did it.

And all was in order.

X

The next day, they organized a sort of farewell dinner. Essi and Geralt had bought a lamb in a village, already prepared. During the haggling, Dandelion made off with fresh garlic, onions, and carrots from the garden behind the house. They also stole a pot to prepare

it in, nimbly slipping it through the farrier's hedge. The witcher had to plug the holes by using the Igni sign.

The farewell dinner was held in a clearing deep in the forest. The fire crackled cheerfully. Geralt carefully turned the prepared animal, stirring the contents of the steaming pot with the stripped branch of a pine tree. Little-Eye, who knew nothing about cooking, was content to make the atmosphere agreeable by singing ribald verses with her lute.

It was a dinner party. In the morning, it was agreed that each would go his own way in search of what he already had. But unaware of that fact, ignorant of just how far the road would take them, they had decided to separate.

After eating their fill and drinking the beer that Drouhard had offered them, they talked and laughed together. Dandelion and Essi sparred in song. Geralt, lying on spruce branches with his hands behind his head, thought that he had never heard such beautiful voices and such beautiful ballads. He thought of Yennefer. He also thought of Essi. He had the feeling that...

At the end of the evening, Little-Eye sang with Dandelion the celebrated duet of Cynthia and Vertven, a marvelous love song beginning with the words: "These are not my first tears..." Geralt had the impression that even the trees leaned in to listen to the troubadours.

Then Little-Eye, who smelled of verbena, lay down next to him, pressed against his shoulder, lay her head on his chest, then sighed perhaps twice before falling into a peaceful sleep. The witcher did not sleep until much later.

Dandelion, absorbed by the glow of the fire that was going out little by little, remained seated and played a few discreet chords on his lute.

He began with a few measures that he transformed into a quiet melody. The words were born with the music, captured by it like insects in translucent amber.

The ballad recounted the story of a certain witcher and of a certain poet: the circumstances of their encounter at the seaside, amid the squalling of the gulls; their mutual love at first sight; the sincerity of their love; their indifference toward a death that could not destroy this love nor separate them.

Dandelion knew that few would believe the story told by the ballad, but he didn't care: one writes a ballad for the emotion it conveys.

Dandelion could have changed, some years later, the content of that ballad to reflect the truth. He did not. The true story was indeed moving. Who would hear, indeed, that the witcher and the poet parted and never saw each other again? That four years later, Little-Eye died of smallpox in Vizima during an epidemic? That Dandelion carried her body in his arms far from the funeral pyres burning away in the city, alone and quiet, into the forest, and buried with her, according to her wishes, two objects: her lute and the azure pearl with which she was never parted.

No, Dandelion kept the first version of his ballad, but he never sang it again. Not ever, for anyone.

In the morning, a hungry and furious werewolf took advantage of the darkness of the night that had not yet dissipated and invaded the camp; but, recognizing the voice of Dandelion, he listened for a moment to the melody before disappearing into the forest.

The Sword of Destiny

This is a fan translation of a French translation of the story from Andrzej Sapkowski's The

Sword of Destiny (L'Epee de la Providence). / am not a native or even a strong French

speaker but I hope that the result is sufficiently readable for my fellow Anglophones who may

be trying to read Blood of Elves and wondering who the hell Ciri is. Here you go.

Braenn's dialog is a very rough approximation. In the original it is a muddle of archaic

words, mistaken homonyms, etc.

I

He discovered the first body around noon.

The sight of the dead rarely shook the witcher. His gaze passed over most of them with perfect indifference. But not this time.

The boy was fifteen. He lay on his back, legs wide apart; something, on his lips, was frozen, like a grimace of terror. Geralt knew nonetheless that the child had died on the spot, that he had not suffered, that he probably didn't even see death coming. The arrow had pierced his eye and penetrated deep into the skull through the eyesocket. The fletching consisted of tiger-pheasant feathers, painted yellow and jutting above the grass.

Geralt looked around himself quickly. He found what was looking for without difficulty: a second arrow, identical, stuck in the trunk of a pine tree, about six steps back. He understood what had happened. The child had not heeded the warning: frightened by the whistle and the impact of the arrow, he had taken off running in the wrong direction. The side that the arrow told him not to go, to turn around. The lightning hiss and the poison pen, the brief impact of the point that bit into the wood. "Human! Not another step!" That was the declaration of the whistle and the impact. "Human! Begone! Go quickly from Brokilone. You have conquered the entire world, human, you have left your mark everywhere, you peddle everything in the name of modernity, an era of change, what you call progress. But we want neither you nor your progress. We don't want any of your changes. We want nothing that you bring with you." Whistle, impact. "Out of Brokilone!"

Human, out of Brokilone, thought the witcher. Even if you are fifteen, crossing the forest, driven by fear, without knowing your way. Even if you are seventy, forced to gather firewood, because your infirmity has warranted that you be chased from the cottage and deprived of food. Even if you are six, drawn by the flowers that bloom in the sun-drenched clearing. Out of Brokilone! Whistling, impact.

In the past, he thought, before shooting to kill, they gave two warnings. Three, even.

In the past, he thought, continuing on his way. In the past.

Progress...

The forest did not seem to warrant such a sinister aura. It was, in fact, terribly wild and impenetrable, but this was nothing out of the ordinary in the depths of a forest where each shaft of light, each touch of sun that the leaves and branches of the large trees allowed to filter through, was immediately exploited by dozens of young birch, alder and hornbeam, by brambles, ferns and junipers, covering with their shoots a land of brittle wood, of dry branches and rotted trunks, remains of the oldest trees at the end of their battle and their life.

There was not the heavy, ominous silence ordinarily associated with the places where these things dominated. On the contrary, Brokilone was alive. Buzzing insects, lizards rustling underfoot, beetles shining in rainbow colors, thousands of spiders crawling on canvases where droplets sparkled, woodpeckers striving against the trunks, jays chattering.

Brokilone was alive.

But the witcher could not allow himself to be complacent. He knew where he was and did not forget the boy with the pierced eye. Among the mosses and pine needles, he sometimes saw bleached bones stripped by carnivorous ants.

He continued on his way - cautiously, but swiftly. The tracks were fresh. He thought he could make the capture, stop, and return to the people that he served. He thought, despite everything, he was not too late.

Wrongly.

He would not have noticed the second body without the reflection of the sun on the sword that the dead man clutched in his hand. He was a grown man. The simplicity of his dark gray garments revealed a humble origin. With the exception of blood stains blooming from two arrows planted in his chest, his clothing was clean and new: he was not, then, a simple valet.

Geralt looked around him and found the third corpse, dressed in a leather jacket and a green tunic. The ground around the body was entirely trampled, the moss and the needles stamped down into the dirt. There could be no doubt: this man had suffered at length.

He heard a groan.

Quickly, he parted the juniper branches and saw the deep hole that they had concealed. In the hollow, a man of strong constitution was lying on the exposed roots of a pine. His hair was black, like his beard, contrasting with the terrible, even deathly pallor of his face. His light deerskin doublet was red with blood.

The witcher vaulted into the hole. The wounded man opened his eyes.

"Geralt..." he moaned. "Oh gods... I must be dreaming..."

"Freixenet?" said the witcher, surprised. "You're here?"

"I... ah..."

"Don't move." Geralt knelt next to him. "Where are you hurt? I don't see the arrow..."

"It went clean through. I broke the tip, then I took it out... Listen, Geralt..."

"Shut up," Geralt said, "because you're losing all your blood. You have a pierced lung. I need to get you out of here, damn it! What the devil were you doing in Brokilone? This is dryad territory, their sanctuary; no-one leaves alive. Don't you know that?"

"Later..." Freixenet moaned. He spat blood. "Later, I'll explain... Now, get me out of here... Ah! Damn it! Gently... ah..."

"I can't." Geralt stood, looking around. "You're too heavy..."

"Leave me," the wounded man muttered. "Leave me, it's a shame... But save her... By all the gods, save her..."

"Who?"

"The princess... ah... Find her, Geralt..."

"Keep quiet, by all the devils! I'll find something to pull you out of there."

Freixenet coughed loudly and spat again; a dense stream of blood fell from his beard. The witcher swore. He leapt out of the hole and examined his surroundings. Needing two young trees, he went to the edge of the clearing where he had noticed an alder.

Whistle, impact.

Geralt froze. The arrow shot into the trunk at head-height was fletched with a hawk feather. He looked in the direction indicated by the shaft; he knew where it was fired from. About fifty paces away there was another hole, a tree stump lifting its tangle of roots into the sky and still clinging to an enormous mass of sandy soil. Further on, there was a massive

blackthorn and the darkness was striped by the light bands of the trunks of birch trees. He saw no-one. He knew he would see nothing.

He raised both hands in the air, very gently.

"Ceddmil! Va an Eithne medth e Duen Canelll Essed Gwynbleidd!"

He heard the muffled rustling of a bowstring, then saw an arrow shot deliberately for him that he could, this time, locate: right in the sky. He lifted his gaze, stopped in his tracks and tumbled to aside. Geralt froze. The arrow was planted almost vertically in the moss, two steps from him. Almost instantly, a second arrow joined the first at an identical angle. He feared that he would never see the flight of the third.

"Medth Eithne!" he repeated. "Essed Gwynbleidd!"

"Gldeddyv vort!"

A voice like a whisper of wind responded. A voice, not an arrow. He was alive. Gently, the witcher loosened the buckle of his belt and removed his sword, holding it far from his body and then tossing it to the ground. The second dryad emerged without a sound from behind the trunk of a tree surrounded by junipers, less than ten paces from him. Although she was petite and slender, the trunk seemed thinner still. Geralt did not understand how he could have failed to notice her arrival. Her garment - a harlequin

fabric combining a number of shades of green and brown, in leaves and scraps of bark, but not at all detracting from the grace of her body - had effectively camouflaged her. Her hair, tied back by a black scarf at her brow, was olive-colored, and stripes painted with walnut ink streaked her face.

More to the point, the dryad was drawing her bow and taking aim.

"Eithne!" he cried.

"Thdess aep!"

He was silent, docile, unmoving, hands held away from his body. The dryad did not lower her weapon.

"Dunca!" she cried. "Braenn! Caemm vort!"

The one that had fired on him appeared from the blackthorn and crossed the tree stump, jumping deftly across the hole. Despite the mass of dried branches, he heard none crack beneath her feet. He felt behind him a slight rustle, like the sound of a leaf carried by the wind. He knew that the third dryad stood behind him.

One of them picked up Geralt's sword in a movement like lightning. She had hair the color of honey, tied back with a headband of rushes. A quiver filled with arrows hung on her back.

The one that was the farthest away, near the hole, was fast approaching. Her clothing was indistinguishable from that of her companions. She covered her dusky brick-colored hair in a braided crown of clover and heather. Her bow remained lowered, but an arrow was already nocked.

"Ten thesse in medth aep Eithne llev? " she asked, coming very close.

Her voice was extraordinarily melodic; her eyes were enormous and black.

"Ess' Gwynbleidd? "

"Ae... aesseld... " he stammered. But the words of the Brokiloneon dialect that sang from the mouths of the dryads could not escape from his mouth and were bruised by his lips. "Does one of you speak the common tongue? I don't know much..."

"An'vdill. Vort Hinge,"" she cut in.

"I am Gwynbleidd, the White Wolf. Madame Eithne knows me. I have business with her. I have lived before in Brokilone. In Duen Canell."

"Gwynbleidd."

The one with brick-red hair blinked her eyes.

"Vatt'ghern?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "The witcher."

The olive-haired one restrained her anger and lowered her bow. The one with brick-red hair watched Geralt with large eyes; her green-tinted face remained completely motionless, dead, as if she were a statue. That immobility did not allow him to judge the beauty of her features; the thought stumbled on her indifference, insensitivity, and even cruelty. Geralt silently reproached himself for his poor judgment in seeing false humanity in this dryad. He should have known that she was simply older than the two others. Despite their appearances, she was actually much, much older.

Silence hung over their indecision. Geralt heard Freixenet moaning, groaning, coughing. The one with brick-red hair had also heard, but her face remained impassive. The witcher put his hands on his hips.

"There, in the hole," he said calmly, "is an injured man. Without help, he will die."

"Thdess aep!"

The olive-haired one drew her bow, directing the tip of the arrow directly at Geralt's face.

"You want to let him die?" he continued, without raising his voice. "To choke gradually on his own blood, so simply? In that case, it would be better to finish him."

"Shut up," the dryad barked, using the common tongue.

Even so, she lowered her weapon and released the tension of the string. She turned to the second with an inquisitive look. The one with brick-red hair nodded, indicating the hole beneath the tree stump. The olive-haired one ran to it, quickly, without a sound.

"I want to see Madame Eifhne," Geralt repeated. "I'm on a mission..."

Indicating the honey-haired one, the eldest said:

"She will lead you to Duen Canell. Go."

"Frei... and the wounded man?"

The dryad looked at him, blinking her eyes. She continued to toy with the nocked arrow.

"Nevermind that," she replied. "Go. She will take you."

"But..."

"Va' en vortl" she said curtly, her lips thinning.

Geralt shrugged his shoulders and turned to the honey-haired one. She seemed to him to be the youngest of the three, but he could be mistaken. He noticed the blue of her eyes.

"Let's go."

"Very well," the honey-haired one responded. After a moment of hesitation, she returned his sword. "Let's go."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Shut up."

She made off quickly through the heart of the forest without giving him a glance. It was an effort for Geralt to follow her. The dryad was trying - deliberately, Geralt knew - to make the man she was guiding collapse finally into the brush, complaining, exhausted, unable to continue. Too young to know that he was a witcher, she was unaware that she was not dealing with a human.

The girl - Geralt understood that she was not a born dryad - stopped suddenly and turned. He saw her breasts heaving beneath her dappled garment; she was trying with difficulty not to pant.

"Shall we slow down?" he suggested with a smile.

"Yea. " She gave him a grudging look. "Aeen essedth Sidh? "

"No, I'm not an elf. What's your name?"

"Braenn," she replied, resuming the journey a little more steadily, without any intention of losing him.

They walked together then, one beside the other. Geralt caught the scent of her sweat:

the ordinary perspiration of an ordinary girl. The sweat of dryads recalled the smell of crushed willow branches.

"And what were you called before?"

She fixed her eyes on his. Her lips drew back suddenly. He thought that she would get angry or order him to shut up. She did neither.

"I don't remember," she responded, hesitating.

He thought she was lying.

She didn't appear to be more than sixteen years old and could not have lived in Brokilone for more than six or seven years: if she had been taken in

earlier, even as a small child or a newborn, he would not be able to recognize her as a human. Blue eyes and fair hair could also occur among the dryads. Dryad children, conceived in celebrated encounters with elves or humans, only inherited the natural qualities of their mothers and could only be born as daughters. It was exceedingly rare, and in general only in later generations, that a child was born with the eyes or the hair of an anonymous male ancestor. Geralt was nevertheless sure that Braenn did not possess a drop of dryad blood. That was of no great importance. By birth or not, she was now well and truly one of them.

"And you?" She watched him with suspicion. "What is your name?"

"Gwynbleidd."

She nodded.

"Well then... Gwynbleidd."

They moved more slowly than before, but always with a certain velocity. Braenn, it was obvious, knew Brokilone well. If he had been alone, the witcher would not be able to maintain such a pace and remain on course. Braenn quickly reached the edge of the forest; she followed the winding and hidden paths, crossed ravines at an agile run across the fallen logs that served as bridges, waded bravely into the glossy expanses of marshes green with duckweed that the witcher had never dared to cross on his own, losing many hours or even days to get around them.

Braenn's presence alone did not protect Geralt from the wilderness. There were places where the dryad slowed her pace, advancing very carefully, feeling the ground, taking the witcher by the hand. He understood why: the pitfalls of Brokilone were legendary. There was talk of spiked pits, arrow traps, falling trees, the terrible "hedgehog": a ball bristling with spines that was attached to a rope and fell unexpectedly, clearing all in its path. There were also places where Braenn stopped and whistled melodiously. Whistles then answered her from the brush. There were places, too, where she stopped, her hand resting on an arrow in her quiver, ushering Geralt into silence and waiting, tensely, for the source of sounds in distant thickets.

They had to make camp despite the efficiency of their pace. Braenn invariably chose a place at a height where gusts of hot air regulated the temperature. They slept on dried ferns, very close to one another: a dryad custom. In the middle of the night, Braenn snuggled tightly against him. Nothing more. He took her in his arms. Nothing more. She was a dryad. It was only for warmth.

They resumed their journey at dawn, when it was still nearly dark.

II

They crossed a meadow dotted with lesser wooded slopes, following the meandering of the misty valleys and leaving behind them the large grassy clearings and devastated forests.

Braenn stopped once more. She inspected their surroundings. Her attitude might indicate that she had lost her way, but Geralt knew that was impossible. Taking advantage of the pause, he sat on a fallen trunk.

He heard then a scream. Short. Strident. Desperate.

Braenn immediately went down on one knee and retrieved two arrows from her quiver. Taking one between her teeth, she slotted the second and drew her bow, aiming judiciously through the bushes.

"Don't shoot!" Geralt cried.

He leapt over the tree trunk and crossed through the mountains of vegetation.

In a modest clearing at the foot of a rocky escarpment, a small figure dressed in a gray jacket was cornered. Five paces from him, something was approaching slowly and disturbing the grass. Something dark brown and measured in yards. At first, Geralt thought that it was a snake, but he noticed the yellow legs, moving, hooked, and the plated segments of its long thorax. He realized that this was not a snake. It was much more dangerous.

Pressed against the tree, the little one was continuously making plaintive little cries. The long quivering antenna of the giant centipede, sensing odors and heat, rose up from the grass.

"Don't move!" shouted the witcher, stamping to divert the attention of the insectoid.

But the centipede did not react: its antennae were busy locating the scent of its next victim. The monster moved into action, curled itself in an 'S' and charged. Its bright yellow legs twinkled through the grass with the regularity of a galley's oars.

"Yghern!" Braenn cried.

In two bounds, Geralt reached the clearing. He broke into a run, drawing the sword from the sheath on his back. With a blow from his hip, taking advantage of his momentum, he pushed the petrified little one to one side and into a bramble bush. The insectoid began to quiver in the grass; it threw itself then at the witcher, raising up its front segments and snapping fangs that were dripping with venom. Geralt danced, leaping over the plated body of the monster and, turning, tried to strike at a vulnerable gap in the carapace with his sword. The monster was nevertheless too fast; the sword skidded over the chitinous armor without biting in, as if a thick carpet of moss was cushioning the blow. Geralt tried to escape, but not swiftly. With colossal force, the insectoid wrapped its abdomen around the legs of the witcher, who lost his balance. He tried to extract himself. Without success.

The centipede curved and tried to seize him with its forceps. In the process, it violently scraped the tree, coiling around it. At that moment, an arrow whistled over Geralt's head; it loudly pierced the animal's carapace, nailing it to the trunk of the tree. The centipede twisted, broke the arrow and escaped; but two other projectiles had already struck. The witcher kicked away from the abdomen and rolled to one side.

On one knee, Braenn shot arrow after arrow with incredible speed, and without missing the insectoid. It broke the shafts; but each additional arrow pinned it to the tree. The flat animal mouth, glistening and dark brown, gnashed its jaws; it snapped its mandibles at the places where the arrows pierced it, thinking stupidly that it could hit its enemy that way and wound him.

Geralt jumped aside and put an end to the fight with a single blow, hurling his sword through the air. The tree served the purpose of a chopping block.

Braenn approached slowly, her bow always drawn; she gave a kick to the thorax of the animal that continued to squirm in the grass and wriggle its legs; she spat.

"Thanks," the witcher said, crushing the severed head of the centipede with his heel.

"For what?"

"You saved my life."

The dryad looked at him. There was nothing in her expression, neither comprehension

nor emotion.

"Yghern," she responded, tapping the still-squirming carcass with her foot. "He broke some of my arrows."

"You saved my life and that of this little wood-nymph," Geralt repeated. "But by the devil, where has she gone?"

Braenn carefully parted the thorn bushes, digging deeply with her arm through the spiny shoots.

"It's as I thought," she exclaimed, extracting the small figure in a gray jacket from the brush. "Look at this, Gwynbleidd."

It was not a dryad. Neither was it an elf, a sylph, a pixie, or a hobbit. It was the most human of little girls. Even within the territory of Brokilone: the place least conducive to such a being...

She had fair hair, mouse-gray, and large impetuous green eyes. She could not have been more than ten years old.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Where did you come from?"

She did not respond. Where have I seen her before? he thought. / have already seen her somewhere. Her or someone very like her.

"Don't be afraid," he told her, looking embarrassed.

"I'm not afraid," she muttered under her breath.

She was visibly cold.

"We must eclipse ourselves," Braenn interrupted, inspecting their surroundings. "When one yghern appears, a second arrives, sometimes simultaneously. I don't have many more arrows."

The little girl turned her gaze to the dryad, opened her mouth and rubbed it with the palm of her hand to wipe away the dust.

"But by the devil, who are you then?" Geralt repeated, staring at her. "What are you doing in... in this forest? How did you get here?"

The little girl bowed her head, sniffing.

"Are you deaf? Who are you? I'm asking you. What's your name?"

"Ciri," she confessed in a sniff.

Geralт turned. Braenn, who was checking her bow, furtively met his glance.

"Listen, Braenn..."

"Sir?"

"Is it possible... Is it possible that she... that she has escaped you... that she has fled from Duen Canell?"

"Sir?"

"Don't play the fool with me," he said, getting angry. "I know that you take young humans. Did you yourself arrive in Brokilone by falling from the sky? I ask you: is it possible that..."

"No," the dryad cut in. "I have never seen her before."

Gerald watched the little girl. Her tousled ash-gray hair, littered with pine needles and leaves, nevertheless seemed clean: no odor of smoke, manure or grease. Her hands, while certainly dirty, were small and delicate, without scars or blemishes. The clothing she was wearing, a gray jacket with a red hood, betrayed no origin, but her ankle-boots were crafted from calf leather. She was decidedly not a country girl. Freixenet! the witcher remembered suddenly. This is the girl Freixenet was searching for! It was for her that he entered Brokilone.

"Where are you from, little brat? I'm asking you."

"How dare you address me in that way?"

The little girl insolently raised her head and stomped her foot against the ground, but

the soft moss cushioned the gesture.

"Ah!" exclaimed the witcher, smiling. "There we are, Princess. In name only, because the outward appearance remains miserable. You come from Verden, don't you? You know there are people searching for you? Don't worry, I'll bring you home. Listen, Braenn..."

No sooner than he looked away, the little girl turned and ran.

"Bloede Turd!" yelled the dryad, grabbing her quiver. "Caemm 'ere!"

The little girl ran blindly, trampling the ground and stumbling over the dry branches.

"Stop!" Geralt cried. "Where are you, little pest?"

Braenn instantly drew her bow. The arrow whistled violently in a low arc; the point stuck loudly in a tree and ruffled the hair of the little girl, who recoiled and fell to the ground.

"You idiot!" the witcher growled angrily, approaching the dryad. Braenn nimbly pulled a new arrow from her quiver. "You could have killed her!"

"This is Brokilone," she replied arrogantly.

"And she is a child!"

"And so?"

He noticed without allowing a word to escape that the arrow was fletched with tiger-pheasant feathers, painted yellow. He turned his back on her and plunged quickly into the wood.

Huddled at the foot of a tree, the little girl had lifted her head to look at the arrow planted in the trunk. She heard Geralt's footsteps, rising, but the witcher caught up to her with a rapid leap and grabbed hold of her hood. She turned her head to him, then stared fixedly at the witcher's hand. Geralt let go.

"Why did you run?"

"It's none of your concern," she replied, sniffing. "Leave me alone, you, you..."

"Filthy brat," the witcher growled angrily. "This, this is Brokilone. The centipede wasn't enough for you? You won't last until morning in this

forest. Don't you understand?"

"Don't touch me!" she said defensively. "You lackey! I am a princess, as you said yourself!"

"You're nothing but a stupid little brat."

"I am a princess!"

"Princesses don't wander all alone in the woods. Princesses don't sniffle."

"I'll order that your head be chopped off! Hers too."

The little girl wiped her nose and shot a hostile look at the dryad who was approaching. Braenn burst out laughing.

"Well, stop this crying," the witcher said curtly. "Why did you run, Princess? Where would you go? What are you afraid of?"

The little girl kept quiet, still sniffing.

"As you wish." He murmured to the dryad: "We're going. If you want to be alone in the forest, that's your choice. But the next time a yghern attacks you, don't bother to scream, because it certainly is not befitting of a princess. Princesses know how to die without complaint, and how to blow their noses properly. Goodbye, Your Royal Highness."

"Wa... Wait..."

"Yes?"

"I'll come with you."

"It is an honor. Isn't that right, Braenn?"

"But you can't take me back to Kistrin! Promise?"

"Who is..." he began. "Ah, by the devil! Kistrin. Prince Kistrin? The son of Eryyll of Verden?"

The little girl took out a small handkerchief and blew her nose, turning her face away.

"No more games," Braenn said gloomily. "We must return to the path."

"One minute, one minute." The witcher stood and looked haughtily at the dryad. "Our plans have slightly changed, my sweet archer."

"Pardon?"

"Madame Eithne will wait. I must accompany this little girl home. To Verden."

"You will go no other way. Her either."

The witcher smiled horribly.

"Be careful, Braenn," he warned. "I'm not the kid from yesterday whose eye you pierced with an arrow in ambush. I know how to defend myself."

"Bloede arss!" she growled, raising her bow. "You go to Duen Canell. Her also. Not to Verden!"

"No, no, not to Verden!" The little girl with ash-gray hair rushed to the dryad and clung to her slender thigh. "I am staying with you! Let him go, if he wants, all alone to Verden and that idiot Kistrin!"

Braenn did not even give her a glance: she preferred to keep her eyes on Geralt. She nevertheless allowed her bow to lower.

"Ess turd!" she spat at his feet. "Very well, go where your eyes take you! I'm curious to see if you survive. You will die before you leave Brokilone."

She's right, Geralt thought. I don't have a chance of getting out. Without her, I can neither leave Brokilone nor reach Duen Canell. Too bad, we'll see then. I may be able to convince Eithne...

"Very well, Braenn," he concluded apologetically. He smiled: "Don't be angry, my sweet. Yes, it will be as you wish. We will all go to Duen Canell

to pay a visit to Madame Eithne."

The dryad muttered something between her teeth and removed the arrow from her bowstring.

"Let's go," she said. She adjusted the scarf in her hair. "We have lost too much time."

"Oh!" the little girl wailed after a step.

"What is it?"

"I have something... in my leg."

"Wait, Braenn! Come on, little girl, I'll carry you on my shoulders."

From the heat of her body emanated a smell of wet feathers.

"What is your name, Princess? I forgot."

"Ciri."

"Where is your kingdom, if I may be permitted to ask?"

"I will not say," she replied. "I will not say, that's all."

"It wouldn't kill you. Stop squirming and don't sniffle in my ear. What explains your presence in Brokilone? You got lost? You took a wrong turn?"

"Actually, I never get lost."

"Stop fidgeting. You ran away from Kistrin? Castle Nastrog? Before or after marriage?"

"How do you know?" she asked, sniffing with a preoccupied air.

"I am incredibly intelligent. Why exactly flee into Brokilone? There were no directions less dangerous?"

"It's my stupid horse."

"You're lying, Princess. At your size, you could only ride a cat. And even then, it would have to be very sweet-tempered."

"Marck was leading it. The squire of the knight Voymir. In the forest, the horse stumbled and broke a leg. Then we got lost."

"You say that this never happens to you."

"He got lost, not me. There was fog. We got lost."

You're lost, thought Geralt. Poor little squire of knight Voymir: he had the misfortune to meet Braenn and her companions. The boy - who had probably never been with a woman — had made up his mind to help a little girl with green eyes after hearing tales of knights and the virgins they are required to marry. He had then helped her only to fall to the arrow of a motley dryad who herself has probably never been with a man, but already knew how to kill.

"I asked you: you fled before or after the marriage?"

"I ran away, that's all. What does it matter to you?" she said, frowning.

"Grandmother told me I had to go to the castle and get to know this Kistrin. Only to get to know him. Then, his father, the big king..."

"Ervyll."

"For him, right away, he only had marriage in mind. But me, I don't want this Kistrin. Grandmother told me..."

"He displeases you so much, the prince Kistrin?"

"I don't want him," Ciri declared haughtily, sniffing loudly. "He's big, stupid, and ugly. He has bad breath. Before I left, I saw one of his portraits where he wasn't so big. I don't want a husband like him. I don't want to marry."

"Ciri," the witcher replied hesitantly. "Kistrin is still a child, just like you. In a few years, he could become a nice, very attractive young man."

"Then they can send me another portrait in a few years!" she snorted. "And to him too. He told me that I was a lot prettier than the portrait he received. He told me that he loved Alvina, a lady of the court, and that he wants to become a knight. You see? He doesn't want me and I don't want him. What good is that marriage?"

"Ciri," murmured the witcher, "he is a prince, and you are a princess. Princes and princesses are made to unite. Such is the custom, that's how it is."

"You talk like all the others. You think you can lie to me because I'm still small."

"I'm not lying to you."

"You're lying."

Geralt fell silent. Ahead of them, Braenn, astonished by the silence, turned around before resuming the walk with a shrug.

"Where are we going?" Ciri asked sadly. "I want to know!"

Geralt kept quiet.

"Answer when I ask you a question!" she threatened, underscoring her order with a loud sniff. "Don't you know... who is on you?"

He did not react.

"I'll bite your ear!"

The witcher had had enough. He took the girl down from his shoulders and set her on the ground.

"Listen, kid," he said sternly, gripping the buckle of his belt. "I'll put you over my knee and give you a good thrashing. No-one will prevent me here:

this is not the royal court and I am neither a courtier nor a servant. You will regret not staying at Nastrog. You'll understand very shortly that it is better to be a married princess than a brat lost in the forest. Married princesses have the right to be intolerable, it is a fact. Married princesses are never even spanked, except perhaps personally by the prince, her husband."

Ciri frowned, sobbing and sniffing a few more times. Braenn, leaning against a tree, watched without blinking.

"So?" asked the witcher, wrapping his belt around his wrist. "Are we going to behave decently and kindly? Or will I have to tan your royal hide? Well?"

The little girl sniffed again and then shook her head quickly.

"You will be sensible, Princess?"

"Yes," she growled.

"It's nearly the brown hour," said the dryad. "Let's continue on our journey, Gwynbleidd."

The forest became more sparse. They crossed young sandy woods, fields of heather, misty prairies where herds of deer grazed. The temperature fell.

"Venerable lord," said Ciri, breaking a very long silence.

"My name is Geralt. What is it?"

"I'm terribly hungry."

"We'll stop soon. It's almost nightfall."

"I can't stand it," she continued, sobbing. "I haven't eaten anything since..."

"Don't cry." He reached into his wallet and took out a piece of fat bacon, a small slice of cheese and two apples. "Here."

"What is that yellow thing?"

"Bacon fat."

"That, I don't want," she growled.

"It goes down well," he said, swallowing the piece of animal fat. "Eat the cheese. And an apple. Just one."

"Why just one?"

"Don't fidget. Eat both."

"Geralt?"

"Hum?"

"Thank you."

"It's nothing. Eat heartily."

"No... not for this. For this too, but... You saved my life before, from the centipede... Brr... I almost died of fear..."

"There are many things that can kill you that way," he confirmed seriously. There are many things that can kill you in even more horrible and tragic ways, he thought. "You can thank Braenn."

"Who is she?"

"A dryad."

"An evil fairy of the forest?"

"Yes."

"They're the ones that we... They steal children! She abducted us? Except you're not small. Why does she speak so strangely?"

"She speaks as she speaks, it's not important. The important thing is how she shoots. Don't forget to thank her when we stop."

"I will not forget," she replied, sniffing.

"Don't squirm, princess, future wife of the prince of Verden."

"I will never be the wife of some prince," she grumbled.

"Well, well, you won't marry anyone. You will become a hamster and take refuge in a burrow."

"That's not true! You don't know anything at all!"

"Don't scream in my ear. Don't forget about my belt."

"I will not be the wife of any prince. I will be..."

"Yes? What?"

"It's a secret."

"Ah! A secret. Great." He lifted his head. "What's going on, Braenn?"

The dryad had stopped.

She shrugged, looking at the sky.

"I am breaking," she replied sadly. "All because of what you picked up. Here we make camp: it's vespers."

III

"Ciri?"

"Hum?"

The little girl sniffled, rustling the branches on which she rested.

"You're not cold?"

"No," she sighed. "Today, it's good. Yesterday... Yesterday I was horribly frozen... Oh, by the gods!"

"Strange," said Braenn, untying the laces of her long and supple boots. "While skinny, she has traveled a vast distance despite the sentinels, the swamps and the thickets. Strong, healthy, courageous. She will be useful to us, indeed... most useful."

Geralt cast an eye quickly over the dryad and her eyes shining in the darkness. Braenn leaned her back against the tree and untied her scarf, freeing her hair with a brisk shake of her head.

"She was found in Brokilone," she murmured, anticipating his comment. "She is ours, Gwynbleidd. We go to Duen Canell."

"Madame Eithne will decide," he replied bitterly.

But he knew that Braenn was right.

Pity, he thought, watching the little girl squirm on her cushion of greenery. A girl so resolute. Where have I seen her before? No matter. It's a real pity. The world is so large and so beautiful. Until the end of her life, her world will be limited to Brokilone. That end might even be soon: until the day she sinks into the ferns, with a cry and the hiss of an arrow, fighting an absurd war for mastery of the forest on the side of those who are to blame for her loss. For those who... yes, sooner or later.

"Ciri?"

"Yes?"

"Where do your parents live?"

"I have no parents," she said, sniffing. "They drowned in the sea when I was little."

Yes, he thought, that would explain no small number of things. A child of a dead prince. Who knows, maybe the third daughter in a family with four boys already. Graced with a noble title that is in fact less important than that

of a chamberlain or squire. A little thing with ashen hair and green eyes who meanders through the court and therefore must be disposed of as soon as possible by finding a husband. As soon as possible, before she becomes a little woman, a threat of scandal, of a misalliance or of the incest that the promiscuity of a communal bedroom in the castle can only favor...

The flight of the little girl did not surprise the witcher. He had already met a number of young princesses, even of royal blood, taken in by traveling theater troupes and happy to have escaped from a king who, though decrepit, was always eager for descendants. He had encountered the sons of kings, preferring the uncertain life of a mercenary rather than marriage to a lame and syphilitic princess chosen by his father for an inheritance as questionable as it was miserable, but guaranteeing an alliance and the sustainability of the dynasty.

He lay down next to the girl and covered her with his cloak.

"Go to sleep," he murmured. "Go to sleep, little orphan."

"Oh, yes?" she muttered. "I am a princess, and not an orphan. I have a grandmother. She is queen, what do you think? When I tell her that you wanted to hit me with a belt, my grandmother will order your head chopped off, you'll see."

"But that's monstrous, Ciri! Have mercy."

"You'll see!"

"You are such a nice little girl. Chopping off heads, this is terribly wrong. You won't say anything, will you?"

"I'll tell her everything."

"CM..."

"I'll tell everything, everything, everything. You're afraid, huh?"

"Yes, very. You know, Ciri, that when you cut off someone's head, he can die?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"How could I dare?"

"You will see for yourself, then! My grandmother does not joke. When she puts her foot down, the greatest warriors and knights kneel before her. I saw it myself. And if one of them disobeys, squeak, he's beheaded."

"That's awful, Ciri."

"How?"

"It's surely your head that they'll take off."

"My head?"

"Of course. It's your grandmother, the queen, who arranged your marriage with Kistrin and sent you to Verden, to the castle of Nastrog. You have disobeyed. When you come back... Squeak! No more head."

The little girl remained silent. She had even stopped fidgeting. He heard the click of her tongue while she bit her lower lip. She sniffled:

"It's not true! Grandmother wouldn't let anyone cut off my head, because... she's my grandmother, isn't she? At most, I would get..."

"Oh, yes?" Geralt laughed. "Your grandmother doesn't joke around, isn't that right? You have already had beatings?"

Ciri fixed him with an expression full of anger.

"You know what?" he said. "We'll tell your grandmother that I have already beaten you. No-one can be punished twice for the same offense. What do you think?"

"That you're stupid." Ciri rose up on her elbows, rustling the branches. "When grandmother learns that you've beaten me, she'll cut off your head, as simple as that!"

"Even though, as you say, there's so little in my head?"

The little girl didn't respond. She sniffed once more.

"Geralt..."

"What is it, Ciri?"

"Grandma knows that I'm obligated to come back. I don't have to be a princess or even the wife of that idiot Kistrin. I must come back, that's all."

You are obligated, he thought. Unfortunately, this depends on neither you nor your grandmother. It will depend on the mood of old Eithne and on my ability to convince her.

"Grandmother knows," continued Ciri. "Because I... Geralt, swear to me that you won't repeat this to anyone. It's a horrible secret. Terrible, I tell you. Swear."

"I swear."

"I'll tell you. My mama was a sorceress, you know. And my papa was cursed. That's what one of my nannies told me, and when grandmother learned, it was a terrible scene. Because I'm predestined, you know?"

"For what?"

"I don't know," she responded, preoccupied. "But I'm predestined. That's what my nanny told me. And grandmother said that she will not allow it, that she'd rather all the castles fall in ruin. You understand? And my nanny said that nothing could counter predestination. Ah! And then my nanny started crying and grandmother started screaming. You see? I'm predestined. I'll never be married to that idiot Kistrin. Geralt?"

"Sleep," Geralt said, his jaw dropping in a yawn. "Sleep, Ciri."

"Won't you tell me a story?"

"What?"

"Tell me a story," she grumbled. "Am I expected to go to sleep without hearing a story? It's impossible."

"I don't know, damn it, I don't know any stories. Sleep."

"Don't lie. You know. When you were small, no-one told you any stories? What are you laughing about?"

"Nothing. I was just reminded of something."

"Ah! You see! Go on, tell it."

"What?"

"A children's story."

He smiled again and placed his hands beneath his neck, looking at the stars that twinkled between the branches just above their heads.

"Once there was... a cat," he began. "An ordinary cat, with stripes, who was hunting mice. One day, the cat went alone on a long walk through a dark, terrible forest. He walked and walked and walked..."

"Don't think that I'll fall asleep before he arrives," she murmured, pressing against him."

"Quiet, little pest. He walks and walks and meets a fox. A red fox."

Braenn sighed, lying down on the other side of the witcher. She hugged him too,
gently.

"And then?" Ciri sniffed. "Tell the rest."

"The fox looks at the cat. He asks: 'Who are you?' The cat replies: 'I am a cat.' The fox retorts: Ah! And you are not afraid, you cat, to walk alone in

the forest? What if the king decides to go hunting? What will you do with the dogs and hunters on their horses? I tell you, cat, the hunt is a terrible thing for the likes of you and I. You have a fur coat, I have one too. The hunters are without pity for us, because they have fiancées and mistresses whose hands and necks shiver: they turn us into stoles and muffs for those whores."

"What are those, muffs?" asked Ciri.

"Don't interrupt my story.

"The fox then continues: 'I, dear cat, know how to escape them. I have a thousand and two hundred eighty-six methods: I am cunning. And you, dear cat, how many tricks do you possess against the hunters?'"

"Oh! What a pretty story," Ciri enthused, snuggling even closer against the witcher. "Tell me... How did the cat respond?"

"Yes," Braenn murmured from the other side. "How did he respond?"

The witcher turned his head. The dryad's eyes sparkled. Her tongue was slightly parting her lips. Evidently, he thought, young dryads are fond of stories. Just like young witchers: they are rarely told fictional stories. Young dryads fall asleep to the rustling trees; young witchers to the ache of their muscles. Our eyes shone, like Braenn's, when we listened to Vesemir's stories, there at Kaer Morhen. It was a long time ago... so long...

"And then?" Ciri prompted impatiently. "What happened next?"

"The cat replies: 'I, dear fox, do not have multiple ways, but only one: Hop! I climb up a tree. This should be sufficient, I believe?' The fox smiles: Well then! Dear cat, you're nothing but a fool. Turn tail and run from here, because you will perish if the hunters track you.'

"Suddenly, without warning, with neither transition nor delay, the hunters emerge from the bushes: on top of the cat and the fox!"

"Oh!" Ciri whimpered.

The dryad shook violently.

"Quiet!"

"They throw themselves upon them then, shouting: 'Forward! Skin their hides! For the muffs, the muffs!' They unleash the dogs upon the cat and the fox. And the cat, hop! climbs up the tree as cats do. Right to the top. And the dogs, snap! seize the fox. Even before the red-furred one could make use of one of his cunning routes, he was transformed into a lady's stole. The cat meows from the top of the tree, defying the hunters. They cannot reach him, because the tree is too high. They wait at the bottom, swearing against the gods of the earth, but leave empty-handed. The cat then descends the tree and goes quietly home."

"And then?"

"Nothing. The story is over."

"And the moral? Stories always have a moral, don't they?"

"What?" Braenn asked, shaking harder against Geralt. "What is that, a moral?"

"Good stories always have a moral, bad ones don't," confirmed Ciri, sure of herself.

"That one was good," the dryad retorted. "Each received what he deserved. We must climb up to the top of the tree from the yghern, sickly little one, like the proud feline. Without hesitation: the top of the tree, at once, and wait with wisdom. Survive. Without resignation."

Geralt chuckled.

"Weren't there any trees in the grounds of Castle Nastrog, Ciri? Instead of coming to Brokilone, you could have climbed to the top and waited for Kistrin to lose interest in the wedding."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Yes."

"You know, I can't stand you."

"That's awful, Ciri, you've touched me right in the heart."

"I know," she nodded, sniffing, and then pressed close against him.

"Sleep well, Ciri," he murmured, breathing in the pleasant smell of feathers.

"Sleep well. Good night, Braenn."

"Dearme, Gwynbleidd."

IV

The next day, they reached the Trees. Braenn knelt and bowed. Geralt sensed that he should do the same. Ciri sighed in admiration.

The Trees, primarily oak, yew, and white walnut, were a dozen yards across. It was hardly possible to estimate the height of their peaks. The place where their powerful, sinuous roots transformed into a single trunk was located very high above their heads. They could move much faster: the colossi left plenty of space, and other vegetation, in their shadow, could not survive. Only a bed of rotten leaves remained.

They could move faster, but they walked slowly. In silence. Bowing their heads. They were, among the Trees, miniscule, insignificant, trivial. Negligible. Even Ciri kept quiet. She didn't say a word for nearly half an hour.

They left the perimeter of the Trees after a hour of walking, to again sink into the ravines and damp beech forests.

Ciri's cold was getting worse and worse. Geralt, who had no handkerchiefs, and who was tired of hearing the constant sniffing, taught her to blow her nose in her fingers. This pleased the little girl enormously. From her smile and her sparkling eyes, the witcher knew that she was delighted by the idea of being able to show that trick to the court during a

banquet or an audience with an overseas ambassador.

Braenn stopped suddenly and turned.

"Gwynbleidd," she said, pulling her green scarf down around her neck, "come. I need to cover your eyes. I must."

"I know."

"I will guide you. Give me your hand."

"No," Ciri protested, "I'll guide him. Okay, Braenn?"

"All right, sickly little one."

"Geralt?"

"Yes?"

"What does that mean, Gwyn... bleidd?"

"White Wolf. That's what the dryads call me."

"Careful, a root. Take care not to trip. They call you that because you have white hair?"

"Yes... oh! Damn!"

"I told you there was a root."

They continued to walk. Slowly. The leaves on the ground were slippery. Geralt was feeling a warmth on his face. The sun's glow filtered through the cloth that covered his eyes.

He heard Ciri's voice:

"Oh! Geralt. How beautiful it is here... It's a shame you can't see it all. There are so many flowers. And birds. You hear them singing? Oh! There are so many! Such numbers. And then the squirrels... Careful, we're going

to cross a stream on a path of stones. Don't fall into the water. What fish! There are so many. They swim in the water, you know! There are so many animals. Nowhere else are there so many..."

"Nowhere," he muttered, "nowhere. We have arrived in Brokilone."

"What?"

"Brokilone. The end of our journey."

"I don't understand..."

"No-one understands. No-one wants to understand."

"Take off your blindfold, Gwynbleidd. We've arrived."

A thick fog engulfed Braenn up to the knee.

"Duen Canell, the place of the Oak. The heart of Brokilone."

Geralt had already been here before. Twice. But he had never told anyone. No-one would have believed him.

There was a sinkhole entirely covered by the tops of immense green trees, bathed in the fog and vapor emanating from the earth, the rocks, the hot springs. A sinkhole...

The medallion that he wore around his neck vibrated gently.

A sinkhole flooded with magic. Duen Canell. The heart of Brokilone. Braenn lifted her head and gave a shrug of her quiver.

"Come, give me your hand, sickly little one."

At first, the sinkhole appeared dead and abandoned. But not for long. A strong and melodic whistle was heard. A slender dryad with dark hair descended gracefully, walking along a barely visible spiral of polypore fungus that embraced the trunk of a nearby tree. She was dressed like the others in a camouflaged garment.

"Cedd, Braenn."

"Cedd, Sirssa. Va 'n vort medth Eithne d? "

"Neen, aefder, " replied the dark-haired one, casting a languid glance at the witcher. "Ess' ae'n Sidh?"

Particularly attractive, even by human standards, she laughed, showing her shining white teeth. Geralt, aware that the dryad was looking him over from head to toe, lost his composure and felt foolish.

"Neen. " Braenn turned her head. 'Ess' vatt'ghern, Gwynnbleidd, a vden medth Eithne va, a'ss."

"Gwynbleidd? " The lovely dryad pursed her lips. "Bloede caerm! Aen'ne caen n 'wedd vort! T'essfoile!"

Braenn chuckled.

"What's going on?" asked the witcher, annoyed.

"Nothing," Braenn chuckled again. "Nothing. Come on."

"Oh! Look!" Ciri marveled. "Look, Geralt, at all these houses, how funny they are!"

Duen Canell really began at the bottom of the sinkhole. The "funny houses," whose forms resembled large balls of mistletoe, were hung from the branches and trunks of trees at various heights, just above the ground or higher, and even at the peaks. Geralt also saw some larger constructions on the ground: the huts made of woven branches and covered with leaves. He sensed the presence of life behind the openings of these constructions, but the dryads remained invisible. They would be far fewer in number than on his previous visit.

"Geralt," Ciri murmured. "These houses are growing! They have leaves."

"They are made of living trees," explained the witcher. "That's the way the dryads live, and that's how they construct their homes. A dryad never hurts

a tree by cutting or sawing. They know nevertheless how to grow the branches to form shelters."

"How cute. I'd love to have a house like this in our park."

Braenn stopped in front of one of the largest constructions.

"Inside, Gwynbleidd, is where you will meet Madame Eithne. Vdfdill, sickly little one."

"What?"

"It is a farewell, Ciri. She's saying goodbye."

"Ah! Goodbye, Braenn."

They entered. Inside the "house" sparkled a kaleidoscope of sunbeams, filtered and screened by the frame.

"Geralt!"

"Freixenet!"

"But you live! By all the devils!"

The wounded man beamed. Freixenet raised himself on his bed of fir. He saw Ciri clinging to the witcher's thigh. His eyes shone in their sockets; he flushed crimson.

"So there you are, little pest! I came within a hair of losing my life because of you! Ah! You're lucky that I can't get up, because I would already have you firmly spanked!"

Ciri pouted.

"That's the second one who wants to beat me," she replied, comically wrinkling her nose. "I'm a young girl... Young girls don't get smacked! It's not allowed."

"I will show you what's allowed," Freixenet responded, coughing, "filthy little scab! Eryll has lost his mind... Every message more terrified than the last, he says that your grandmother has set her army on him. Who would believe that you ran away yourself? Everyone knows who Eryll is and what he likes. Everyone thinks that he... did something in a drunken state and ordered you drowned in a pond! We are on the brink of war with Nilfgaard. The treaty and the alliance with your grandmother were thrown to the devils! You see the extent of your misdeed?"

"Don't get worked up over this," said the witcher, "you could cause a hemorrhage. How did you manage to get here so fast?"

"If only I knew. I was unconscious the better part of the time. They pushed something disgusting down my throat. Forcefully, pinching my throat... What an affront, those bitches..."

"You survived thanks to what they forced down your throat. They carried you all the way here?"

"They put me on a sled. I asked for news of you, but they kept silent. I was sure you had fallen to an arrow. You were gone so quickly... and there you are safe and sound, and without so much as a limp; what's more, well done, you found Princess Cirilla. Devil take me, Geralt, you always pull through, like a cat landing on its feet."

The witcher smiled without responding. Freixenet turned his head to cough violently and spit out a pink substance.

"So," he added, "from the fact that they haven't finished me off, I must be doing well. They know you, those diabolical huntresses. That's the second time you've saved me from danger."

"Don't mention it, baron."

Freixenet tried to sit up, groaning in pain, but had to give up.

"With my barony in the latrines," he grumbled, "I was Baron of Hamm. I am currently something resembling a voivode for Eryll of Verden. Or

rather I was, because even if I get out of this forest alive, my only place in Verden will be on the scaffold. Cirilla, that little minx, escaped under the surveillance of my guards. You think I would have gone adventuring with two companions in Brokilone for fun? No, Geralt, I too have fled. I could only count on the clemency of Ervyll under the condition that I brought her back. And then we came across those accursed creatures... Without you, I would still be in the hole. You saved me again. It's destiny. It's clear as crystal."

"You're exaggerating."

Freixenet turned his head.

"It's destiny," he repeated. "It must have been written that we would meet again, witcher. And that once again, you'd save my skin. I remember that we spoke in Hamm after you freed me from the spell of that bird."

"It's chance," Geralt retorted coldly, "chance, Freixenet."

"What chance? Hell, without you, I would still be a cormorant today."

"You were a cormorant," Ciri cried in excitement, "a real cormorant, a bird?"

"Yes," replied the baron, clenching his teeth. "A... a whore... a bitch... for revenge."

"You clearly didn't give her a fur stole," Ciri said, wrinkling her nose, "or a muff."

"There was another reason," Freixenet continued, blushing slightly, "but what difference does it make to you, you dirty brat?" Ciri, visibly annoyed, turned her head; Freixenet began to cough. "Yes... me... You delivered me from a spell at Hamm. Without you, Geralt, I would be spending the rest of my life as a cormorant. I would fly over the lake and deposit my droppings on the branches of the trees, dressed in the shirt woven by my little sister with pine nettles, in her pigheaded determination to improve things, to

liberate me from the spell. Hell, when I'm reminded of that shirt, I want to hit someone. What an idiot..."

"Don't talk like that," said the witcher, laughing. "Her intentions were pure. She had been tricked, that's all. A number of nonsensical myths approach the question of disenchantment. You're lucky, Freixenet. She could have ordered that you be plunged into boiling milk. It has happened before. Dressing someone in a nettle shirt doesn't threaten their health, even if it doesn't help."

"Hmm, perhaps so. Perhaps I expected too much of her. Elise has always been a fool, since she was a little girl: silly and pretty, perfect material for becoming the wife of a king."

"What pretty material is that?" asked Ciri. "And why to become a wife?"

"I told you not to meddle in this, brat. Yes, Geralt, I was lucky that you appeared in Hamm and that the good brother of the king was inclined to spend the ducats to have you disenchant me."

"You know, Freixenet," responded the witcher, laughing more and more, "that the story has spread far and wide?"

"The real version?"

"Not quite. First, you've been decked out with ten brothers."

"Oh no!" The baron raised himself on his elbows, coughing. "Including Elise, then we would be twelve? What dark idiocy! My mother was certainly not a rabbit!"

"That's not all. It was thought that a cormorant was not sufficiently romantic."

"Indeed it isn't! There is nothing romantic about it!" The baron made a face, massaging his chest, which was bandaged by twigs and strips of bark. "And what then do they say I was transformed into?"

"A swan. More precisely, swans plural, because there were eleven of you, remember?"

"And how, I ask you, is a swan more romantic than a cormorant?"

"I don't know."

"Me neither. But I am betting in this story, Elise delivers me from this fate with a damned shirt of nettles."

"You've got it. By the way, how's Elise?"

"The poor thing is consumptive. She won't last much longer."

"It's sad."

"Yes," Freixenet confirmed without emotion, looking away.

"To return to your enchantment..." Geralt leaned against the wall of braided, supple branches. "Do you still have any symptoms? Feathers growing on your body?"

"By the grace of the gods, no," sighed the baron. "All is well. The only characteristic that remains from that time is a taste for fish. Nothing beats a good feast of fish. Sometimes I visit the fishermen in the morning on the harbor, and before they've caught even one more noble piece, I content myself first with the delectable taste of a handful of a dozen bleaks, still teeming in their holding tanks, some small loach straight, a dace or a chub... It's more pleasure than a real banquet."

"He was a cormorant," Ciri said slowly, looking at Geralt. "And you're the one who disenchanted him. You know how to cast spells?"

"That seems obvious," retorted Freixenet. "All witchers know how."

"Wit... Witcher?"

"You don't know that he's a witcher? The famous Geralt of Rivia! Indeed, how could a brat like you know that he's a witcher? In our time, it's not like

it was. There aren't many witchers today. You almost never meet them anymore. Have you already seen one?"

Ciri slowly shook her head without looking away from Geralt.

"A witcher, kid, is..." Freixenet paused and turned pale, seeing Braenn enter the hut. "No, I won't! I don't want anything stuffed down my throat, no way! Geralt, tell her..."

"Calm down."

Braenn only gave Freixenet a furtive glance. She went directly to Ciri, who was crouched next to the witcher.

"Come," she said. "Come, sickly little one."

"Where are we going?" Ciri asked, grimacing. "I will not. I want to stay with Geralt."

"Go ahead," Geralt said, forcing a smile. "You'll have fun with Braenn and the young dryads. They'll show you Duen Canell..."

"She didn't blindfold me," Ciri said very slowly. "On the way, she didn't blindfold

me. You, yes. So that you can't come back. That means that..."

Geralt stared at Braenn. The dryad shrugged and took the little girl in her arms, holding her close.

"That means..." Ciri's voice broke. "That means I will never get out of here. Doesn't it?"

"No-one escapes their destiny."

They all turned their heads in the direction of that voice: full, low, firm and decisive. A voice that demanded that one listen and tolerated no objection. Braenn bowed. Geralt knelt.

"Madame Eithne..."

The sovereign of Brokilone wore a thin green dress, light and flowing. She was, like most of the dryads, small and thin, but carried herself proudly. Her serious and hard face, her pursed lips, gave the impression that she was larger and more powerful. The color of her hair and her eyes resembled molten silver.

She entered the hut escorted by two younger dryads, armed with bows. She silently motioned to Braenn, who hastened to take Ciri by the hand and led her toward the exit, bowing her head. Ciri, pale, confused, followed with a stiff and inelegant gait. When she passed beside Eithne, the silver-haired dryad seized her chin and looked the little girl in the eyes for a long time. Geral saw Ciri shaking.

"Go," Eithne said at last. "Go, my child. Don't be afraid of anything. Nothing can change your destiny. You are in Brokilone."

Ciri trotted quietly behind Braenn. She turned at the door of the hut. The witcher noticed that her lips trembled and that her eyes filled with tears, brilliant as glass. He nevertheless continued to kneel silently, always bowing his head in respect.

"Rise, Gwynbleidd, welcome."

"Hail, Eithne, sovereign of Brokilone."

"I am once again pleased to welcome you to my forest. Even though you come without my consent or even my knowledge. Entering Brokilone in this way is risky, White Wolf. Even for you."

"I'm on a mission."

"Ah!" The dryad smiled slightly. "This explains your temerity, to use the only appropriate term. Geralt, the immunity of delegates is only observed among humans. As for me, I do not accept it. I recognize, moreover, nothing that is human. Here, this is Brokilone."

"Eithne..."

"Silence," she cut in without raising her voice. "I gave the order to spare you. You will leave Brokilone alive. Not by virtue of your status as a messenger, but for other reasons."

"You don't want, then, to know for whom I act as delegate?"

"To be honest, no. Here, we are in Brokilone. You come from the outside, a world that does not interest me at all. Why should I waste my time hearing delegates? What does it matter to me, the proposals or the ultimatums set by someone who I know thinks and feels differently from me? What does it matter to me what King Venzlav thinks?" Geralt turned his head in astonishment.

"How do you know that it's Venzlav who sent me?"

"It's all too evident," replied the dryad, smiling. "Ekkehard is too foolish. Eryyll and Viraxas hate me too much. I see no other surrounding areas."

"You know a lot about what is happening outside Brokilone, Eithne."

"I know many things, White Wolf. It is the privilege of my age. Now, if you would, I would like to resolve a matter. The man who looks like a bear..." the dryad stopped smiling and looked at Freixenet, "is your friend?"

"We know each other. I once delivered him from a spell."

"The problem is that I do not know what to do with him. I can't order his execution

after allowing him to be cared for, even if he is a threat. He doesn't have the air of a fanatic, perhaps of a scalp-hunter. I know that Eryyll pays for every dryad scalp. I can't remember how much. The price increases along with everything else from inflation."

"You are mistaken. He is not a scalp-hunter."

"Why then did he enter Brokilone?"

"To look for the little girl for whom he was responsible. He risked his life to find her."

"That's absurd," she said coldly. "He took more than a risk. He went to certain death. He owes his life to having the constitution and strength of a horse. Regarding the child, she also owes her life to chance. My daughters did not fire, believing her to be a pixie or a leprechaun."

Her gaze rested once more on Freixenet. Geralt noticed that her lips were losing their unpleasant harshness.

"Well then. Celebrate this day."

Eithne approached the bed of branches. The two dryads who accompanied her did the same. Freixenet paled and curled up in the hope of disappearing.

She watched for a moment, blinking her eyes slightly.

"Do you have children?" she asked at last. "I am speaking to you, blockhead."

"Pardon?"

"I spoke clearly."

"I'm not..." Freixenet cleared his throat, coughing. "I'm not married."

"Your family is not important. I want to know if your fat loins are able to kindle fires. By the Great Tree! Have you ever knocked up a woman?"

"Eh, well! Yes... yes, madame, but..."

Eithne gave a careless wave of her hand and then turned to Geralt.

"He will remain in Brokilone," she said, "until he is completely healed and then for some time longer. Then... he will go wherever he pleases."

"Thank you, Eithne." The witcher bowed. "And the little girl... What is your decision?"

"Why do you ask me that?" The dryad's silver eyes fixed coldly on him.
"You know that well."

"She isn't an ordinary child, she is not from a village. She is a princess."

"This does not impress me. It makes no difference."

"Listen..."

"Not another word, Gwynbleidd."

Geralt paused, pursing his lips.

"What about my mission?"

"I am listening," murmured the dryad. "Not out of curiosity. As a personal favor to you: you can testify to Venzlav that his request was made and collect the money that he certainly promised you for your visit to my kingdom. But not now. I am busy. Pay me a visit tonight in my Tree."

Freixenet rose onto his elbows after the dryad was gone. He groaned, coughed, and spat in his hand.

"What does this mean, Geralt? Why am I supposed to stay? What does she want with these children? What story are we beginning, eh?"

"You will keep your head, Freixenet," replied the witcher in a tired voice.
"You will become one of the privileged few who have left Brokilone alive. Lately, in any case. And then, you will become the father of a little dryad, perhaps several."

"How? I must become... a breeding stallion?"

"You can call it what you like. Your choice is limited."

"I understand," groaned the baron, with a vulgar smile. "I've seen prisoners of war working in the mines or digging canals. Of the two evils, I prefer... I simply hope that I have the strength. There are quite a few here..."

"Stop that stupid smiling, thinking your dreams are coming true," Geralt said, scowling. "Here there is no honor, no music, no wine, no fans, let alone hordes of amorous dryads. You will meet one, perhaps two. There will be no sentiment. They will treat the matter and even more so yourself very pragmatically."

"They don't feel pleasure? At the least, I hope that it doesn't hurt them."

"Stop acting like a child. In this respect, they are no different from ordinary women. At least physically."

"What do you mean?"

"It is up to you whether the dryad enjoys herself or not. This does not change the fact that only the outcome will be important. Your person in this case is secondary. Expect no recognition. Ah! And never take the initiative, under any circumstances."

"The initiative?"

"If you meet her in the morning," the witcher continued patiently, "bow down, and by all the devils, don't smile or wink. This is for dryads a gravely serious subject. If she's smiling or approaches you, you can then start the conversation. It is best to talk about trees. If you don't know about those, you can still talk about the weather. If, on the other hand, she pretends not to see you, keep your distance. And keep your distance from the other dryads. And your hands in your pockets. A dryad unprepared for this exchange wouldn't understand what you were doing. You risk a knife-slash for wanting to touch her: she would not understand the intent."

"Have you already tasted the joys of dryad marriage?" joked Freixenet.

"This has happened to you?"

The witcher did not respond. He had before his eyes the beautiful and svelte dryad, the insolence of her smile. Vatt'ghern, bloede caerne. A witcher: a sorry fate. What do you have to report, Braenn? What can he give us? There is nothing to be gained from a witcher...

"Geralt?"

"What?"

"What will happen with Princess Ciri?"

"You can depend on it. She will soon become a dryad. In two or three years, she'll put an arrow through her own brother's eye if he tries to enter Brokilone."

"Damn," shouted Freixenet, blanching. "Ervyll will be furious. Geralt? It wouldn't be possible to..."

"No," interrupted the witcher. "Don't even try. You will not get out of Duen Canell

alive.

"That means the little one is lost." "For you, yes."

VI

The Tree of Eithne was, it went without saying, an oak, or rather three oaks that melded with each other as they grew, still green and betraying no symptoms of desiccation despite the there hundred years, at least, that Geralt attributed to them. The trunks were hollow. The cavity they formed was the size of a large room with high ceilings tapering into a cone. The interior, lit by a feeble lantern, had been transformed into a comfortable home where modesty prevailed over hardness.

Eithne waited, kneeling on a woven carpet. Ciri, washed and cured of her cold, sat cross-legged before her, straight as a ramrod and motionless, her almond eyes wide open. The witcher saw a beautiful face where no trace of dirt or evil grin appeared now.

The dryad was carefully and slowly combing the girl's long hair.

"Enter, Geralt, sit down."

He sat formally, bending first on one knee.

"Are you rested?" she asked, without looking to the witcher and continuing to comb Ciri's hair. "When do you think you will take the path back? What do you say to tomorrow morning?"

"As you wish, sovereign of Brokilone," he responded coldly. "A single word from you is enough to be rid of my indecent presence in Duen Canell."

"Geralt..." Eithne slowly turned her head. "Understand me well. I know you and respect you. I know that you have never harmed a dryad, naiad, sylph or nymph, rather the contrary: you often come to their defense, save their lives. But that changes nothing in this matter. Too many things separate us. Our worlds are different. I neither wish to nor am able to make exceptions. For anyone. I am not asking if you understand this, because I know that you do. I ask if you accept it."

"What difference does it make?"

"None. But I want to know."

"I accept it," he confirmed. "What will happen to the girl? She doesn't belong in this world either."

Ciri gave him a fierce look and then glanced up toward the dryad. Eithne smiled.

"Not for long," she replied.

"Eithne, please, think again."

"About what?"

"Give her to me. Let her leave with me to her own world."

"No, White Wolf." The dryad once again thrust the comb deep in Ciri's ashen hair. "I will not give her to you. You should understand better than anyone."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Brokilone is not closed to the world's news. Some of it concerns a certain witcher who, in payment for his services, sometimes extorts a very curious oath: 'Give me what your house holds without your knowledge,' 'Give me what you possess without knowing it.' Isn't this familiar to you? In this way, you have tried for some time to change the course of destiny. In search of the young boys that destiny offers you for your succession, you try to avert death and oblivion. You struggle against nothingness. Why then do you greet this consequence with astonishment? I care only about the destiny of dryads. Is that not justice? For each dryad assassinated by the humans, I take a young girl."

"In the taking, you stir up animosity and the desire for vengeance. You promote hatred."

"Human hatred... Nothing new under the sun. No, Geralt. I will not give her back. Especially since she is healthy. It's somewhat rare today."

"Somewhat rare?"

The dryad directed her large silver eyes to him:

"They abandon sick girls to me: diphtheria, scarlet fever, croup, and even smallpox lately. They think that we have no immunity and that an epidemic will destroy us, or at least decimate our ranks. We disappoint them, Geralt. We have something more than immunity. Brokilone takes care of its children."

Eithne fell silent. She leaned down and used her second hand to delicately untangle a stubborn knot.

"May I divulge the content of the message sent to you by the king Venzlav?"

"Isn't it a waste of time?" asked the dryad, raising her head. "Why trouble yourself? I know perfectly well what King Venzlav intends to offer me. There is no need for the gift of clairvoyance to know that. He wants me to

grant him a part of Brokilone's territory from, let's say, up to the Vda river which he considers or would like to consider a natural border between Brugge and Verden. In exchange, I suppose that he will offer me an enclave: a little piece of wild forest. I suppose also that his word and his royal prerogative guarantees that this little bit of wild land, this modest patch of primeval forest, will be ours for ever and ever, and that no-one will dare attack the dryads, that they will be able to live there in peace. What, Geralt? Venzlav wants to end a war with Brokilone that has lasted for two centuries? And for this, the dryads should offer that for which they have perished for two hundred years? Offer Brokilone? So easily?"

Geralt kept silent. He had nothing to add. The dryad laughed.

"The proposition of the king is like this, Gwynbleidd? Or perhaps it is less hypocritical: 'Come down from your complacency, old bogey of the woods, savage beast, relic of the past, and hear what we, King Venzlav, desire: cedar, oak and white hickory, and then mahogany, golden birch, yew for bows and pine for planks. Brokilone runs alongside us, but we import our wood from behind the mountains. We want the iron and copper that's hidden in your basement. We want the gold veins of Craag An. We want to attack, sawing and digging, without hearing the hiss of your arrows. And most importantly: we want to finally become master of all the kingdom has to offer. We do not want a Brokilone and a forest through which we cannot march. Such an entity hurts our pride, irritates us and keeps us awake, as we are, we humans, the owners of the world. We can tolerate in this world some elves, dryads or naiads, provided these creatures stay discreet. Accept our will, Sovereign of Brokilone, or perish.'"

"Eithne, you have yourself agreed that Venzlav is neither so idiotic nor fanatical. You know without a doubt that he is a just king, venerating peace, saddened and worried when blood is shed..."

"If he keeps his distance from Brokilone, not a drop of blood will spill."

"You know very well," replied Geralt, lifting his head, "that the situation is somewhat different: humans have been killed at the Scorched Earth, at the Eighth League, in the hills of the Owl; and then too in Brugge, on the left

bank of the Ruban. All these places are situated outside of Brokilone. The forest was cleared there a hundred years ago!"

"What meaning do a hundred years have for Brokilone? And a hundred winters?"

Geralt was silent.

The dryad gave him an indifferent glance, then caressed Ciri's ashen hair.

"Accept Venzlav's proposal, Eithne."

The dryad gave him an indifferent glance.

"What will that give us, we the children of Brokilone?"

"The possibility of survival. No, Eithne, don't interrupt me. I know what you mean. I understand your pride in an independent Brokilone. But the world changes. An era is coming to an end. Whether you like it or not, the humans' mastery of the world is a fact. Only those who assimilate into their society survive. The others disappear. Eithne, there exist forests where dryads, water sprites and elves live peacefully in accord with the humans. We are so close to each other. Humans can become the fathers of your children. What does this war you are waging give you? The potential fathers of your children fall one by one to your arrows. What is the cost? How many dryads by blood are there in Brokilone? How many girls are abducted and educated? You even need a Freixenet. You have no choice. I only see her: a little human girl terrorized and stultified by drugs, paralyzed with fear..."

"I'm not afraid at all!" Ciri cried then, taking up for an instant her devilish expression. "And I'm not stultified! That's not true! Nothing can happen to me here. That's the truth! I'm

not afraid! Grandmother said that dryads aren't evil, and my grandmother is the most intelligent woman in the world! My grandmother... my grandmother said that there must be forests like this..."

She stopped and bowed her head. Eithne burst into laughter:

"Child of Old Blood," she said. "Yes, Geralt, the Children of Old Blood of which you speak continue to be born throughout the world. And you, you tell me about the end of an era... You ask me if we will survive..."

"The brat was to be married to Kistrin of Verden," cut in Geralt. "It's a shame that union must now be impossible. Kistrin will one day succeed Eryll: under the influence of a wife with such opinions, the expeditions against Brokilone would quickly end."

"I don't want Kistrin!" the little girl protested softly. A light appeared in her green eyes. "What Kistrin is looking for is a pretty and stupid material. I am not a material that is available! I will not become a royal princess!"

"Silence, Child of Old Blood." the dryad pressed Ciri to her breast. "Do not cry. You will never become a royal princess, of course..."

"Of course," interrupted the witcher. "And you and I, Eithne, know very well what Ciri will become. I see that this fate is already decided. Too bad. What response shall I report to King Venzlav, Sovereign of Brokilone?"

"None."

"What do you mean, none?"

"None. He will understand. Once, long ago, before Venzlav was in the world, heralds were sent to the border of Brokilone. Horns and trumpets sounded; armor shone; standards and pennants flapped in the wind. They proclaimed, "Give back Brokilone! King Capradonte, sovereign of the Bald Mountain and the Flooded Prairie, requires that you abdicate Brokilone!" The response of Brokilone was always the same. When you leave my forest, Gwynbleidd, turn around and listen. In the whisper of leaves, you will hear the response of Brokilone. Send it to Venzlav and add that as sure as the oaks of Duen Canell, he will never hear any other. To the last tree, to the last dryad."

Geralt remained silent.

"You say that an era is ending," Eithne continued slowly. "You're wrong. There are things that will never end. You speak of survival? Well, I fight for my survival. Brokilone remains thanks to my fighting: the trees live longer than humans, but they must be protected from axes. You speak to me of kings and princes. Who are they? They are what I know as the skeletons of bleached bones that lie in the depths of the forest, in the necropolis of Craag An, in the marble tombs, on the heaps of yellow metal and shining stones. Meanwhile, Brokilone remains; the trees sing over the ruins of palaces; their roots crack the marble. Your Venzlav recalls those kings? Yourself, do you remember, Gwynbleidd? If not, how can you say that an era ends? What can you know of extermination or of eternity? What right do you have to speak of destiny? Do you have the least sense of destiny?"

"No," he agreed. "I don't. But..."

"If you do not know," she interrupted, "no 'but' can apply. You do not know. It's as simple as that."

Eithne lapsed into silence and turned her head, touching her forehead.

"When you came here for the first time, all those years ago, you did not already know. And Morenn... my daughter... Geralt, Morenn is dead. She perished on the border of Ruban in defense of Brokilone. I could not recognize her, what she was reduced to. Her face had been trampled by the hooves of your horses. Destiny? Today, witcher, you who were unable to give descendants to Morenn, you bring me a Child of Old Blood. A little girl who knows what destiny is. No, it is not likely that you will be able to accept and agree with such sensitive knowledge. Repeat for me, Ciri, repeat what you told me before White Wolf, the

witcher Geralt of Rivia, entered the room. Again, Child of Old Blood."

"Your majes... Noble lady," began Ciri in a broken voice. "Don't force me to stay here. I can't... I want... to go. I want to go with Geralt. I must... with him..."

"Why with him?"

"Because it is my destiny."

Eithne turned. Her face was extremely pale.

"What do you think, Geralt?"

The witcher did not answer. Eithne snapped her fingers. Braenn burst into the interior of the oak like a phantom appearing from the night. She held in both her hands a silver chalice. The medallion Geralt wore around his neck began to shake rapidly.

"What do you think?" repeated the silver-haired dryad, rising. "She will not stay in Brokilone! She does not want to be a dryad! She will not replace Morenn for me! She wants to go, go, follow her destiny! Is that so, Child of Old Blood? Is that really what you want?"

Ciri affirmed this with a nod of her head. Her shoulders shook. The witcher had had enough.

"Why do you badger this child, Eithne, since you have already decided to give her the Water of Brokilone? Her will then ceases to have any importance. Why would you behave like this? Why give me this spectacle?"

"I want to show you what destiny is. I want to prove that nothing ends. That everything is always just beginning."

"No, Eithne," he said, rising. "Sorry to spoil this performance, but I have no intention of continuing to be the privileged spectator. You have crossed the line, Sovereign of Brokilone, presenting in this manner the gulf that separates us. You, the elder races, you love to repeat that hatred is a stranger to you, that the sentiment remains a human specialty. That is not true. You also know hate, you know what hatred is. You only dress it up differently: with more wisdom, less violence. And so perhaps with more cruelty. I accept your hatred, Eithne, in the name of all human beings. I deserve it, even though I am sorry for Morenn."

The dryad did not respond.

"Here then is the response from Brokilone that I am supposed to bring to Venzlav of Brugge, isn't it? Warning and defiance? Living proof of the hatred and power that slumber among these trees: a child will receive from the hands of another human child, whose mind and memory were also destroyed, a poison to erase her past. And this response must be conveyed to Venzlav by a witcher who, moreover, knows and has grown fond of these children? A witcher, responsible for the death of your daughter? Well, Eithne, so be it, in accordance with your will. Venzlav will hear your answer. My voice and my eyes are messengers for the king to decipher. But I do not have to watch the spectacle being prepared. I refuse."

Eithne was still silent.

"Goodbye, Ciri." Geralt knelt and pulled the little girl to him; Ciri's shoulders never stopped shaking. "Don't cry. You know that nothing bad can happen to you."

Ciri sniffled. The witcher rose.

"Goodbye, Braenn," he said to the young dryad. "Go in peace and take care of yourself. May your life be as long as that of the trees of Brokilone. And one more thing..."

"Yes, Gwynbleidd?"

Braenn had lifted her head: her eyes were moist.

"It is easy to kill with a bow, girl. It is easy to let go of the string and think: This isn't me, it's the arrow. My hands do not bear the blood of this boy, it's the arrow that killed him, not me. But the arrow does not dream at night. I wish for you not to dream either, little blue-eyed dryad. Farewell, Braenn."

"Mona!" Braenn murmured indistinctly.

The cup that she held in her hands began to tremble. Its clear liquid covered them in rivulets.

"What?"

"Mona!" she cried. "My name is Mona! Madame Eithne, I..."

"Enough," Eithne interrupted harshly. "That is enough, control yourself, Braenn."

Geralt laughed.

"Here is your destiny, Dame of the Forest. I respect your resistance and your struggle, but I know that soon you will be alone: the last dryad in Brokilone will send young girls to their deaths remembering their real names. I wish you good luck even so, Eithne. Goodbye."

"Geralt," murmured Ciri, still standing motionless, her back bent. "Don't leave me alone..."

"White Wolf," said Eithne, taking Ciri's bent back in her arms, "what must she ask of you? Have you decided to abandon her despite this? Are you afraid not to stay with her to the end? Why do you leave her at such a time, leave her alone? Where do you flee, Gwynbleidd? What do you flee?"

Ciri bowed her head even more, but did not start to cry.

"Until the end," agreed the witcher. "Well, Ciri. You will not be alone. I will stay with you. Don't be afraid of anything."

Eithne took the chalice from Braenn's trembling hands and lifted it.

"Can you decipher the ancient runes, White Wolf?"

"Yes."

"Read what is engraved. This is the chalice of Craag An. All the kings now forgotten have wet their lips from it."

"Duettaedn aefcirrdn Cderme Gleddyv. Yn esseth. "

"Do you know what that means?"

"The sword of destiny has two edges... You are one of them."

"Arise, Child of Old Blood." The dryad's voice intimated an unconditional order, an implacable will: "Drink. It is the Water of Brokilone."

Geralt bit his lip, searching the silver eyes of Eithne. His gaze avoided Ciri, who placed her mouth at the rim of the chalice. He had seen it already, before, an identical scene: the convulsions, the hiccups, a terrible cry, unheard, which was extinguished at last little by little. Then the void, the torpor and apathy in the eyes that opened slowly. He had seen it all.

Ciri drank the liquid. On Braenn's motionless face, a tear formed.

"That's enough."

Eithne took the cup from her and placed it on the ground. With both hands, she stroked the ashen hair that fell upon the shoulders of the little girl.

"Child of Old Blood," she continued, "choose. Do you prefer to stay in Brokilone or follow the path of destiny?"

The witcher's head turned incredulously. Ciri breathed more rapidly. Her cheeks took on color. But nothing more. Nothing.

"I want to follow the path of destiny," said the little girl, looking the dryad straight in the eye.

"Let it be so, then," replied Eithne, her voice cold and dry.

Braenn sighed heavily.

"I want to be alone," concluded Eithne, turning her back on them. "I ask you to leave."

Braenn took Ciri and touched Geralt's shoulder, but he rejected the young dryad's hand.

"Thank you, Eithne," he said.

The dryad turned slowly.

"Why are you thanking me?"

"For the providence," he joked. "For your decision. Because it wasn't the Water of Brokilone, was it? Destiny wanted Ciri to return home and it's you, Eithne, who played the role of providence. I thank you."

"You know almost nothing of providence," she replied bitterly. "You know very little, witcher. Very little really. You don't understand the larger picture. You thank me? You thank me for the role I played? For the bargain? For the artifice, deceit, deception? You thank me because the sword of destiny is, you think, made of wood plated with gold? So pursue your logic to its conclusion: do not thank me, but expose me. Expose your arguments, prove to me your reasons, show me your true face. Show me how the human truth triumphs, the common sense by the grace of which, you believe, you control the world. Here is the Water of Brokilone, there remains a little. Will you allow yourself to try it, conqueror of the world?"

Geralt, troubled by her words, hesitated only a moment. The Water of Brokilone, even if authentic, would have no effect on him. The witcher was in effect completely resistant to toxic tannins and hallucinogenic liquids. Had it been possible that it was the Water of Brokilone? Ciri had drunk it and nothing had happened. He took the chalice in both hands and fixed his eyes with the dryad's.

The ground gave way under his feet without warning, as if the world had fallen on his back. The mighty oak spun and shook. Feeling around with difficulty using his numbed hands, he managed to open his eyes, but it was as difficult as moving the marble slab of a tomb. Eithne's eyes, shining like mercury. And other eyes, emerald green. No, not as clear. Like spring grass. The medallion suspended around his neck rang and vibrated.

"Gwynbleidd," he heard, "look carefully. No, closing your eyes will help with nothing. Look, look at your destiny.

"Do you remember?"

He saw a sudden explosion of light piercing a curtain of smoke; large and massive candelabra dripping with wax; stone walls; steep stairs; a little girl

with green eyes and ashen hair coming down the steps, wearing a tiara encrusted with artistically carved gems and dressed in a blue dress with a silver train that was supported by a page above, dressed in scarlet.

"Do you remember?"

His own voice that said... that said:

"I will return in six years... "

An arbor, the heat, the smell of flowers, the heavy and monotonous hum of bees. Himself, kneeling, offering a rose to a woman whose ashen curls were scattered beneath a narrow golden band. On the fingers on the hand that took the rose, rings of emeralds and large green cabochons.

"Return, " said the woman. "Return if you change your mind. Your destiny will be waiting for you."

I never went back, he thought. / never went back to... Where?

Ashen hair. Green eyes.

Again, his own voice in the darkness, into the uncertainty where everything disappears. There are only fires, fires on the horizon. A whirlwind of sparks and purple smoke. Belleteyn! Night of May. Through the clouds of smoke, violet eyes, dark, burning in a pale and triangular face veiled beneath a tangle of black curls, watching.

Yennefer!

"It is too little. "

The thin lips appear to twist. A tear runs down her pale cheek. Very quickly, faster and faster, like a drop of paraffin along a candle.

"It's too little. There must be something more. "

"Yennefer!"

"Nothingness against nothingness," announced the apparition, speaking with the voice of Eithne. "The nothingness and emptiness that exist in you, conqueror of the world, you who are not even capable of seducing the woman you love and who leaves and flees with destiny in the palm of his hand. The sword of destiny has two edges. You are one of them. But what is the other, White Wolf?"

"There is no destiny." His own voice. "There is none. It does not exist. Only death is predestined for us."

"That's right," responds the woman with ashen hair and a mysterious smile. "That's right, Geralt."

The woman is wearing silver armor, bloody, twisted, punctured by the blows of halberds. A trickle of blood runs from the corner of her lips that smile horribly and without reason.

"You make a mockery of destiny, " she said. "You mock her, you toy with her. The sword of destiny has two edges. You are one of them. The other... is it death? But it is we who die. We die because of you. Death cannot catch you. It is content with us. It follows you step by step, White Wolf, and it is others who are dying. Because of you. Do you remember me? "

"Ca... Calanthe!"

"You can save him." It's the voice of Eithne that pierces the spoke screen: "You can save him, Child of Old Blood. Before he disappears into the nothingness that he loves in the black forest that knows no borders."

Eyes, green as spring grass. A touch. Voices crying out in an incomprehensible chorus. Faces.

He sees nothing more and then falls into the abyss, the void, darkness. The voice of Eithne is what he hears last:

"Let it be so."

VII

"Geralt, wake up! Wake up, please!"

The witcher opened his eyes and saw the sun: a golden ducat outlined distinctly in the sky, perched above the crown of trees, beyond the curtain of morning mist. He was lying on wet, spongy moss. A root dug into his back.

Ciri knelt beside him, tugging on the edge of his jacket.

"Plague..." he bellowed. He looked around. "Where am I? Where do I find myself?"

"I don't know either," she replied. "I woke up a moment ago, here, next to you, horribly frozen. I don't remember... You know, eh? It's magic!"

"No doubt you're right." Geralt sat, dislodging the pine needles that had been stuffed into his collar. "No doubt you're right, Ciri. The Water of Brokilone, name to name... It seems that the dryads have amused themselves at our expense."

He stood, lifted the sword that was lying nearby and buckled his belt around his waist.

"Ciri?"

"Yes?"

"You too, you were amused at my expense."

"Me?"

"You are the daughter of Pavetta, the granddaughter of Calanthe of Cintra. You knew from the beginning who I was..."

"No," she responded, blushing. "Not at first. It's you who disenchanting my papa, isn't

it?"

"Not really." He shook his head. "It was your mother... with the help of your grandmother. I only helped them."

"But Nanny said... She said that I was the subject of destiny. Because I was the surprise. The child-surprise, Geralt?"

"Ciri." He looked into her eyes, nodding and smiling. "You can believe me: you are the biggest surprise I have ever met."

"Ah!" The girl's face cleared. "Then it's true! I am the subject of destiny. Nanny predicted that a witcher would come, that he would have white hair and that he would take me with him. Grandmother cried... How will it be? Where are you taking me, tell me?"

"Home, to Cintra."

"Really? I thought that..."

"You will think on the road. Let's go, Ciri, we must leave Brokilone. This is not a safe place."

"But I'm not afraid!"

"Me, I'm afraid."

"Grandmother said that witchers aren't afraid of anything."

"Your grandmother was exaggerating. On our way, Ciri. I think I know where we..." He examined the sun. "Hmm... Let's take the chance... Let's go that way."

"No." Ciri wrinkled her nose and pointed in the opposite direction. "That way. There."

"How do you know?"

"I know, that's all," she responded, shrugging. She put him under her emerald gaze, astonished and helpless. "How... I don't know."

Pavetta's daughter, he thought. The child... The Child of Old Blood? It's possible that she inherited this gift from her mother.

"Ciri..." He unbuttoned his shirt and took out his medallion. "Touch it."

"Oh!" She opened her mouth wide. "It's a terrible wolf. It has fangs..."

"Touch."

"Oh!"

The witcher smiled, feeling the violent vibration of the medallion and the waves traveling up the silver chain.

"It moved," Ciri murmured. "It moved!"

"I know. Come on, Ciri. You'll guide us."

"It's magic, isn't it?"

"Of course."

As predicted, the little girl sensed the way forward. In what manner? This, he did not know. Quickly, more quickly than he would have thought, they came to a path that led them to the crossing of three roads. This was the border of Brokilone, at least as was recognized by humans. He remembered that only Eithne did not consider this the case.

Ciri bit her lip, wrinkled her nose and paused, seeing the sandy roads torn by hooves and wagon wheels. Oriented at last, Geralt could be free of the girl's uncertain suggestions. He took the road east toward Brugge. Ciri, always worried, looked at the road west.

"That way leads to Castle Nastrog," he teased. "You miss Kistrin?"

The girl grumbled, catching up to Geralt. She turned again nonetheless, several times.

"What is it, Ciri?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "This isn't the right path, Geralt."

"Why? We're going to Brugge, home of King Venzlav who lives in a splendid castle where we will visit the baths and where we will sleep on feather beds..."

"It's not the right path," she repeated. "No."

"It's a fact: I've seen the best. Stop brooding, Ciri. Let's go quickly."

They turned a corner surrounded by bushes. Ciri was right...

The soldiers encircled them suddenly, rapidly, on all sides. They wore conical helmets, coats of mail and dark gray tunics sporting the black and gold of Verden. They remained at a distance without drawing their weapons.

"Where do you come from, where are you going?" someone yelled to Geralt, a squat man with spidery legs in a wide stance, wearing a worn green uniform.

His face was tanned and wrinkled like a prune. His bow and his white-fletched arrows rose above his head.

"We come from the Scorched Earth," lied the witcher, holding Ciri's hand fast. "I go home, to Brugge. What is this about?"

"Service of the King," the tanned man replied more politely, having noticed the sword on Geralt's back. "We..."

"Bring him here, Jughans!" cried someone who was farther back on the road.

The soldiers parted.

"Don't look, Ciri," Geralt breathed. "Turn around. Don't look."

A fallen tree blocked the path, cluttering it with branches. The cut and broken base of the trunk, bristling with long shards of white wood, lay in

the thicket bordering the path. In front of the tree stood a cart covered by a tarp. Riddled with arrows, entangled in the yoke and the reins, small long-haired horses were lying on the ground, showing their yellow teeth. One of them still lived. It snorted heavily, continuing to kick.

There were also dead bodies scattered on the bloodstained sand, clinging to the sides of the cart or tangled in the cart wheels.

Two soldiers, then a third, emerged slowly from the ranks of armed men gathered around the cart. There were about a dozen, motionless, holding their horses.

"What happened?" asked the witcher. He tried, for Ciri's sake, to hide the scene of the massacre with his body.

A squinting soldier wearing a short mail coat and high boots watched attentively, scraping his unshaven chin with a rasping sound. On his left forearm he wore the worn and weathered cuff of an archer.

"An attack," he said simply. "Fairies of the woods killing merchants. We are in charge of the investigation."

"Fairies would take out merchants?"

"You see for yourself," said the squinting soldier, motioning with his arm, "they are riddled with arrows, veritable hedgehogs... On the highway! These creatures of the woods are becoming more and more zealous. Soon it will no longer be possible to enter the forest or even come near."

"And you," ventured the witcher, blinking, "who are you?"

"The troops of Ervyyll, the decurions of Nastrog. We served under the command of Baron Freixenet, but the Baron fell to Brokilone."

Ciri opened her mouth, but Geralt signaled for her to be silent, shaking her hand.

"Blood for blood, I say!" growled the squint-eyed soldier's companion, a giant with a doublet trimmed in copper. "Blood for blood! This is not

tolerable. First Freixenet and the Princess of Cintra, now these merchants. By all the gods, vengeance, vengeance I tell you! Otherwise, you will see tomorrow, and the day after, they will kill humans on the steps of their own homes!"

"Brick speaks well," continued the squint-eyed soldier. "Doesn't he? And you, brother, I ask you: where are you from?"

"From Brugge," lied the witcher.

"And this little one, your daughter?"

Geralt shook Ciri's hand again.

"My daughter."

"From Brugge..." Brick frowned. "I tell you, brother, that it's your king, Venzlav, who emboldens the monsters. He is not the ally of our Eryll or of Viraxas of Kerack. If we were fighting on three fronts, we could finally be rid of that breed..."

"How did the massacre happen?" Geralt asked slowly. "Does anyone know? Has a merchant survived?"

"There are no witnesses," said the squint-eyed soldier. "But we know what happened. Junghans, the ranger, read the traces like a book. Tell him, Junghans..."

"Yeah," said the tanned one. "It happened like this: the merchants were rolling down the highway. They stumbled on the downed tree. See, master, the pine felled in the middle of the road is freshly cut. In the brush, there are traces. You see? And when the merchants came down to move the tree, they were fired on from three different sides. From there, the bushes, where there are twisted birch. And there, there are traces. Arrows, see, it's the work of fairies: fletchings glued with resin, the feathers covered in sap..."

"I see," the witcher interrupted, looking at the deceased. "Some of them, it seems to me, survived the arrows and were slaughtered with knives."

From behind the ranks of soldiers standing behind him there came another man, short and thin, dressed in a dashing doublet. He wore his black hair cut very short. His cheeks were shaven and gray. The witcher only needed to look at his small, narrow hands gloved by black mittens, at his fishy eyes, his sword, the handles of stilettos emerging from his waistband and the hem of his left boot... Geralt had seen too many assassins not to recognize another one.

"You have a keen eye," the swarthy man said, very slowly. "My word, you see many things."

"This is the case," said the squint-eyed soldier. "He will report what he saw to his king, Venzlav, since it seems that we must not touch the supposedly good and kind fairies. They can certainly be met during the month of May to be kissed. For that, they may be good. We will see if one of them falls into our hands alive."

"Even half-alive," grinned Brick. "Plague! Where is the druid? It's almost noon and there's no trace of him. It's time to hit the road."

"What will you do?" Geralt asked, without letting go of Ciri's hand.

"How does it concern you?" the dark one growled.

"Why get worked up, Levecque?" interrupted the squint-eyed one, laughing horribly. "We are honest people. We have no secrets. Eryyll sent us a druid, a great sorcerer who can communicate with trees. He will accompany us to the forest to avenge Freixenet and try to save the princess. This is not a walk, brother, but an expedition, pun... pun..."

"Punitive," sighed Levecque.

"Yeah. I had it on the tip of my tongue. Yes, be on your way, brother, because the situation will soon get heated here."

"Yes," Levecque said, looking at Ciri. "It's dangerous here, even more so with a little girl. The fairies love them. Huh, kid? Your mother's waiting for you at home?"

Ciri nodded, trembling.

"It would be a pity if she never saw you again," the dark one continued, without looking away. "She would no doubt complain to Venzlav: by tolerating the dryads, King, you have condemned my daughter and my husband. Who knows if Venzlav wouldn't renew his alliance with Ervyl then?"

"Leave 'em, Mr Levecque," growled Junghans. The creases on his face deepened. "Let 'em go."

"Hello to you, kid."

Levecque reached out his hand and stroked Ciri's head. She shuddered and recoiled.

"What? You're afraid?"

"You have blood on your hand," the witcher said softly.

"Ah!" Levecque lifted his arm. "Indeed. It's the merchants' blood. I wanted to see if there were any survivors. The fairies, unfortunately, were thorough."

"Fairies?" Ciri said in an unsteady voice, not reacting to the pressure from the witcher's hand. "Oh! Sir knight, you are mistaken. It couldn't be dryads!"

"What are you mumbling about, kid?"

The swarthy man narrowed his pale eyes. Geralt glanced right and left, estimating the distances. "They were not dryads, sir knight," Ciri repeated. "It's obvious!"

"Huh?"

"This tree... This tree was cut! With an ax! Dryads never cut a tree, isn't that right?"

"That's right," Levecque responded, looking at the squint-eyed soldier. "Oh! But you're a smart little girl. Too smart."

The witcher had spotted the assassin's black-gloved hand creeping like a spider to the handle of his stiletto. Although Levecque's eyes had not once left the little girl, Geralt knew that the first shot would be brought against him. He waited for Levecque to touch his weapon.

The squint-eyed soldier gasped.

Three movements. Three, only.

The silver-studded forearm struck the left side of the swarthy man's head. The witcher found himself between Junghans and the squint-eyed soldier even before Levecque fell to the ground, and his sword, emerging from its sheath with a hiss, sang through the air and struck the temple of Brick, the giant in the copper-trimmed doublet.

"Save yourself, Ciri!"

The squint-eyed soldier, seizing his sword, jumped aside, but too late. The witcher opened his torso diagonally from top to bottom and then, taking advantage of the energy of the blow, struck instantly, bottom to top, leaving his body branded by a bloody X.

"Guys!" Junghans yelled at the rest of the troops, which were petrified with astonishment. "To me!"

Ciri reached a twisted beech and climbed like a squirrel to reach the top branches, hiding in the foliage. The ranger fired an arrow in her direction without success. The others began to move. Arranged in a semicircle, they drew their bows and took arrows from their quivers. Geralt, kneeling, extended his fingers to form the Aard sign, not at the too-distant archers but at the sand of the path before them, which blinded them in the whirlwind.

Junghans pulled a second arrow from his quiver and bounded agilely.

"No!" Levecque yelled, getting up, armed with a sword in his left hand and a stiletto in his right. "Allow me, Junghans!"

The witcher pivoted smoothly to face him.

"He's mine," Levecque continued, shaking his head and wiping his face with his forearm. "Only mine!"

Geralt, leaning, spun in a half circle, but Levecque did not do the same: he attacked directly. They met, cornered.

He's not bad, thought the witcher, neutralizing with difficulty the rapid movement of the waving blade of the murderer, and deflecting with a half-turn the blow of his stiletto. He did not volunteer a riposte, but leapt to the side, predicting that Levecque would try again and be imbalanced by his wide swing. But the killer was not a novice. He shrank back and also circled with a feline agility. Then he jumped without warning, flashing his sword like a whirlwind. The witcher refused direct confrontation, meeting him with a high and fast parry that forced the killer to recoil. Levecque curled up in preparation for a fourth. He hid one of his stilettos behind his back. The witcher, again, did not attack, did not close the distance, preferring once again to circle around his adversary.

"Every good joke comes to an end," Levecque growled between his teeth. "What do you say we wrap things up, wise guy. Wrap things up before we cut down your bastard in her tree. What do you think?"

Geralt had noticed that the murderer was watching his own shadow, waiting until it reached his opponent, meaning that he would be dazzled by the sun. The witcher stopped turning for the killer's convenience.

His pupils diminished to become two horizontal slits, two tight lines.

To disguise the change, he squinted as if he had been blinded.

Levecque jumped, turned, maintaining his equilibrium with the arm wielding a stiletto and struck with a wrist movement that seemed impossible, bottom to top. Geralt shot forward, turned and parried the blow.

With an equally impossible movement of his wrist and shoulder, he pushed the killer back with the strength of his parry, which ended in a stroke of his blade along the left cheek of his adversary. Levecque staggered, seizing his face. The witcher turned about-face and, throwing all his weight on his left leg and in a short blow severed the carotid artery. Drenched in blood, Levecque curled up and fell to his knees before pitching head first into the sand.

Geralt slowly turned to face Junghans. The latter was aiming his bow, grinning terribly. The witcher bent low, grasping his sword in both hands. The other soldiers were also holding their bows in a deathly silence.

"What are you waiting for?" bellowed the ranger. "Go! Go!"

Then he abruptly stumbled, staggered and jogged a few steps before collapsing, an arrow through his throat. The fletching was made of tiger pheasant feathers, dyed yellow with a concoction made of bark.

Arrows sang out from the black wall of the forest, in long and flat arcs. They seemed to glide slowly and peacefully on whistling feathers and not pick up speed and force until the moment of impact. They struck their targets without error, decimating the helpless mercenaries of Nastrog, falling like leaves onto the sandy road, mowed down like sunflowers under the blows of a stick.

The survivors hurried to the horses, jostling each other. The arrows did not stop whistling. They reached the soldiers as they ran or were already in the saddle. Only three of them managed to bring their horses to a full gallop, shouting and striking the flanks of their mounts. But they didn't go far.

The forest was closed, blocking the way. The sandy highway, sun-drenched, disappeared behind the wall of dense and impenetrable black trunks.

The mercenaries spurred their horses. Frightened and bewildered, they tried to turn around, but the arrows fell all the while. They tore through the mounted soldiers amid the sound of trampling, the neighing of horses and shouting.

Then there was silence.

The wall of the forest enclosing the highway shimmered, faded, flashed with all the colors of the rainbow and disappeared. The road was visible again. There appeared a horse with a gray coat was ridden by a powerful blond-bearded horseman, wearing a seal jacket belted by a strip of plaid wool.

The gray horse advanced restlessly, shaking its head and lifting its forelegs high. He snorted, avoiding the corpses and the smell of blood. The horseman, upright in the saddle, lifted his right hand: a light breeze rustled the branches of the trees.

"Ceddmil, Wedd Brokiloener cried the horseman. "Fdill, And Woedwedd!"

"Fdill!" replied a voice from the forest, carried by the wind.

The green and brown silhouettes disappeared one after the other into the undergrowth of the forest. Only one remained, with hair the color of honey. She approached.

"Va fdill, Gwynbleidd, " she said, coming closer.

"Goodbye, Mona," replied the witcher. "I will not forget you."

"Forget," she replied harshly, adjusting the quiver on her back. "There is no Mona. Mona was a dream. I am Braenn. Braenn of Brokilone."

She gave one more wave of her hand and disappeared.

The witcher turned.

"Mousesack," he said, looking at the rider on the gray horse.

"Geralt," acknowledged the horseman, eyeing him with a cold stare. "An interesting encounter. But start with the most important things. Where is Ciri?"

"Here!!" cried the little girl, completely hidden in the foliage. "Can I come down?"

"Yes, you can," responded the witcher.

"But I don't know how!"

"In the same way you climbed up, but in reverse."

"I'm afraid! I'm at the top of the tree!"

"Come down, I tell you. We have much to discuss, little lady."

"But what?"

"Why, by the plague, did you climb up instead of running into the forest? I would have followed behind you, I wouldn't have had to... Ah! By cholera, come down!"

"I did like the cat in the story! Whatever I do, it's always wrong! Why? I wish I knew."

"I, too," said the druid, "would like to know. And your grandmother, Queen Calanthe would also like to know. Come down, little princess."

Leaves and dry branches tumbled down from the tree. Then there came the sound of ripping fabric. Ciri finally appeared, sliding, her legs apart, along the trunk. In place of the hood of her cloak, she wore only picturesque tatters.

"Uncle Mousesack!"

"In the flesh."

The druid took the little girl in his arms pressed her against him.

"Is it Grandmother who sent you, Uncle? She was put to a lot of trouble?"

"Not too much," said Mousesack, smiling. "She is too busy to wet her strap. The way back to Cintra will take some time, Ciri. Take the opportunity to find an explanation for your adventures. The best, if you take my advice, would be to make it short and to the point. An explanation that it is possible to state very, very quickly. But I believe nonetheless that at the end, Princess, you will cry out very, very loud."

Ciri grimaced with pain, sniffled, grumbled quietly. Her hands instinctively sought refuge at the part of her body that was most at risk.

"Let's go," suggested Geralt, inspecting the area. "Let's go, Mousesack."

VIII

"No," said the druid. "Calanthe has changed her plans: she no longer wants Ciri and Kistrin to marry. She has her reasons. In addition, it will not surprise you to hear that, since this unfortunate attack made on the merchants, King Ervyl has lost much of his credibility in my eyes, and you know that my judgment counts in the kingdom. No, we will not even stop in Nastrog. I will take the little one directly to Cintra. Come with us, Geralt."

"What for?"

The witcher glanced at Ciri, who shivered under a tree, protected by Mousesack's fur cloak.

"You know why. This child, Geralt, is your destiny. Your paths crossed for the third

time, yes, the third time. In a certain sense, of course, especially when it comes to the first two times. I hope, Geralt, that you do not think that this is a simple coincidence."

"What difference does it make what I call it?" replied the witcher, forcing a smile. "Things escape the names we give them, Mousesack. Why take me to Cintra? I've already been there, I've already met her, as you said, by other paths. So what?"

"Geralt, you demanded then an oath that Calanthe, Pavetta, and her husband swore to. It has been upheld. Ciri is the child-surprise. Destiny requires..."

"That I take this child and make her into a witcher? A little girl! Look at me, Mousesack. Can you imagine that I could have been a fresh and pretty little girl?"

"The devil with the witchers' arts!" retorted the druid, carried away. "What does your heart say? What is the relationship? No, Geralt, I see that you do not understand and that I must use simple words. Listen, any cretin can exact an oath. You're one of them. That in itself is nothing extraordinary. It's the child who is extraordinary. As is the link that was created when the child was born. I must be even more clear? Not a problem, Geralt: since the birth of Ciri, your wishes and plans cease to be important, as does what you refuse and what you renounce. Yourself, by plague and cholera, you have ceased to count! Do you understand?"

"Don't shout. You're going to wake her up. Our surprise is sleeping. And when she wakes up... Mousesack, even extraordinary things, one can... One must sometimes renounce."

The druid watched him insistently.

"You know, however, that you can never have a child of your own."

"I know."

"And you renounce her?"

"I renounce her. Do I not have the right?"

"You have the right," Mousesack responded. "And how. But it's risky. There is an old saying that the sword of destiny..."

"... has two edges," finished Geralt. "I know."

"Then do as you think is right." The druid turned his head and spat. "And to think that I was ready to risk my neck for you..."

"You?"

"Yes. Unlike you, I believe in destiny. And I know that it is dangerous to toy with a double-edged sword. Don't play games, Geralt. Take the opportunity that has been given to you. Make the link with Ciri into a normal relationship between guardian and child. Otherwise... This link could manifest in other ways. More terrible. Negative and destructive. I want to protect you, you and the little one. If you wanted to take her, I would not be opposed. I would take the risk of explaining everything to Calanthe."

"How do you know that Ciri would be willing to follow me? Have you had a premonition?"

"No," Mousesack responded seriously. "I know because she fell asleep when you held her tight in your arms, and because she whispers your name in a dream and her hand seeks yours."

"That's enough." Geralt stood. "I should move on. Farewell, bearded one. All my respects to Calanthe. For Ciri's escapades, invent something."

"Your escape is illusory, Geralt."

"My escape from destiny?"

The witcher tightened the straps of a recovered horse.

"No," the druid responded, watching the little girl: "from her."

The witcher nodded and then vaulted into the saddle. Mousesack remained seated, motionless, using a stick to stir the dying fire.

Geralt went slowly through the heather that reached his stirrups, in the main slope of the valley, toward the black forest.

"Geralt!"

He turned. CM stood at the top of the hill, the little figure with ashen hair looking defeated.

"Don't go!"

He waved his hand.

"Don't go!" she screamed with less strength. "Don't go!"

I must, he thought. I must, Ciri. Because... I'm leaving forever.

"Don't think that you'll get away so easily!" she cried. "Don't even think it! You can't run away! I am part of your destiny, you hear?"

There is no destiny, he thought. It doesn't exist. The only thing that is predestined for us all is death. The second side of the sword with two edges is death. The first is me. The second is the death that follows me step by step. I cannot, I have no right to expose you to it, Ciri.

"I am your destiny!"

He heard more cries from the top of the hill, but with less strength and more desperation.

With a kick, he urged his horse on and plunged into the damp forest, black and cold as the abyss, in the familiar shadow and benevolent unending darkness.

Something More

This is a fan translation of a French translation of the story from Andrzej Sapkowski's The Sword of Destiny (L'Epee de la Providence). / am not a native or even a strong French speaker but I hope that the result is sufficiently readable for my fellow Anglophones who may be trying to read Blood of Elves and wondering who the hell Ciri is. Here you go.

I

When the hooves struck the planks of the bridge, Yurga didn't even raise his head. He stifled a scream, dropped the binding from the wheel that he was trying to reattach and crawled under the cart as quickly as possible. In tears, digging his back into the rough coat of mud and manure that covered the

underside of the vehicle's floor, he was screaming intermittently and trembling with fear.

The horse slowly approached the cart. Yurga noticed how cautiously and delicately the hooves moved on the beams that were moldy and rotted through.

"Get out of there," said the unseen rider.

Yurga hissed through his teeth, regathering his wits. The horse snorted and stamped a hoof.

"Easy, Roach," said the rider. Yurga heard the man patting the neck of his horse. "Come out, friend. I won't do you any harm."

The merchant did not believe the stranger's words. There was nevertheless something in the voice that was reassuring and intriguing, although the tone was not pleasant. Muttering prayers to several gods at once, Yurga at last stuck his head cautiously out from under the carriage.

The rider had hair as white as milk, held back by a leather headband, and a black wool coat that fell onto the rump of his chestnut mare. He did not look at Yurga. Leaning on his saddle, he looked at the wheel of the cart and the axle stuck in the split boards of the bridge. He suddenly lifted his head, touching the merchant with his gaze in the process of impassively observing the vegetation that pushed through the banks of the ravine.

Yurga extricated himself with difficulty, grumbling. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand, smearing his face with wood tar from the axle. The rider darted him a somber and attentive look, sharp and cutting as a harpoon. Yurga remained silent.

"The two of us will not be able to free it," the stranger finally said, indicating the stuck wheel. "You're traveling alone?"

"There are three of us, lord," Yurga stammered. "My servants have fled, the cowards..."

"Not surprising," responded the rider, looking down at the bottom of the ravine beneath the bridge. "Not at all surprising. I think you should do the same. There is still time."

Yurga's eyes did not follow the stranger's gaze to the skulls, ribs, and shins scattered among the stones, visible through the burdock and nettles growing on the dry riverbed. The merchant feared that those black eyesockets, beautiful smiling teeth, and all the broken bones would cause him to break down completely, and what remained of his courage would burst like a fish's swim bladder. Then he would flee along the road, stifling his screams, as the driver and the valet had just an hour earlier.

"But what are you waiting for?" asked the rider in a low voice, turning his horse. "Twilight? It will be too late. They will take you as soon as night falls. Perhaps even earlier. Go, mount your horse, come with me. Get out of here as fast as possible."

"And the cart, sir?" Yurga yelled at the top of his lungs, surprising himself with the intensity of his shout, not knowing whether it was fear, despair, or anger that caused it. "The merchandise! A whole year of work! I'd rather die! I won't leave any of it behind!"

"It seems to me that you don't yet know where fate has led you, friend," the stranger said quietly, gesturing with his hand toward the horrible cemetery stretching beneath the bridge. "You don't want to leave the cart here, you say? I tell you that when twilight falls, not even the treasures of King Dezmod will be able to save you. Stop thinking about your damn cart. The devil with your idea to take a shortcut across such a marvelous country. Do you know what massacres have taken place here since the end of the war?"

Yurga indicated his ignorance.

"You don't know," replied the stranger, shaking his head, "but you see what lies below! It's difficult not to notice. They are exactly those who tried to take a shortcut. And you, you say you don't want to leave your cart behind. What does it contain, your famous cart? I'm curious to know."

Yurga did not answer. While looking at the rider from below, he was torn between "oakum" and "old rags."

The rider didn't appear particularly interested in his response. He calmed the chestnut mare who was tossing her head nervously.

"Lord..." the merchant stammered at last. "Help me. Save me. I would be grateful until the end of my days... Don't let me... I'll give you what you want, anything you desire... Save me, lord!"

The stranger turned his head abruptly, keeping both hands on the pommel of the saddle.

"What did you say?"

Yurga, mouth agape, was silent.

"You will give me what I want, repeat it."

Yurga swallowed and closed his mouth. He regretted that he had not thought twice before speaking. His head spun with the most fantastic conjectures concerning the price that the strange traveler could exact. Everything. Even the privilege of a particular trade once a month with his young wife, Chrisididae, did not seem so terrible compared with the loss of his cart, and no doubt much less macabre than becoming a bleached skeleton at the bottom of the ravine. The merchant's atavism quickly bowed to the considerations of the situation. The rider didn't look like a tramp, a vagabond, or a marauder, as many as there were since the end of the war. Neither was he a prince, a councillor, or one of those little knights with a high opinion of themselves who liked to extract money from their neighbors. Yurga estimated his worth at close to twenty gold coins. His commercial nature nevertheless prevented him from offering a price.

He limited himself to speaking indiscriminately of "eternal gratitude."

"I asked you," the stranger repeated calmly, waiting for the silent merchant, "if you

will give me what I want."

He had to speak. Yurga swallowed hard, nodding his head. Against expectations, the stranger did not look triumphant; he did not even seem especially pleased with the success of his negotiation. He spat into the ravine, leaning on his horse.

"But what am I doing?" he said sadly. "Aren't I making a mistake? Either I try to get you out of here. I won't deny that this adventure could be fatal for one or both of us. If we succeed then you, in return..."

Yurga tensed, ready to cry.

"You give me," the rider in the black coat said quickly, "the thing that you did not expect to find on returning home. Do you swear?"

Yurga nodded his head, stammering.

"Good," grinned the stranger. "Now move over. It's best if you hide under the cart again. The sun is setting."

He got down from his horse and took off his coat. The merchant noticed the sword that the stranger carried on a shoulder strap and the harness that crossed his chest. He had the feeling that he had heard talk before of people who carried their weapons in this way. The black leather jacket cut at the waist and the long gauntlets studded with silver could indicate that the stranger was from Novigrad or its area. The fashion for such garments was popular among the youth lately, but the stranger was no longer a young man.

The rider turned after unloading his horse; the medallion suspended on his chest by a silver chain began to shudder; he held in his arms a small iron mug and a long, tied bundle covered in skins.

"Still not under the cart?" he asked, approaching.

Yurga noticed the wolf with bared fangs depicted by the medallion.

"Would you be... a witcher, sir?"

The stranger shrugged his shoulders.

"That's right. A witcher. And now, hide under the other side of the cart. Don't come out and keep your mouth shut. I need to be alone for a moment."

Yurga complied. He crouched near the wheel, hiding underneath the tarp. He preferred not to see what the stranger was doing on the other side of the cart, and wanted to see the bones lying at the bottom of the ravine even less. He looked instead at his shoes and the star-shaped specks of green moss covering the rotten planks of the bridge.

A witcher.

The sun disappeared.

He heard footsteps.

The stranger came out slowly, very slowly, from behind the cart and moved to the center of the bridge. Yurga saw his back. He noticed that his sword was not the same one he had before. It was a beautiful weapon: the hilt, the guard, and the iron embellishments on the scabbard shone like stars. Even at dusk, they glowed.

The golden and purple glow covering the forest faded.

"Sir..."

The stranger turned. Yurga managed to suppress a scream.

The stranger's face was white, white and porous as fresh cheese under his clothes. And his eyes... Oh gods... The terror screamed through Yurga. His eyes...

"Behind the cart, quickly," the stranger ordered in a low voice.

It was not the same voice that he had heard earlier. The merchant suddenly felt the pressure of his overfull bladder.

The stranger turned and walked over the bridge.

A witcher.

The horse tethered to the ladder of the cart groaned and neighed, striking the planks

with its hooves.

A mosquito hummed over Yurga's ear. The merchant did not even move to swat it. A second mosquito arrived. Entire clouds of mosquitoes were concentrated in the brush on the opposite side of the ravine.

They were screaming.

Yurga saw, clenching his teeth painfully, that they were not mosquitoes.

In the increasingly dense twilight, small misshapen silhouettes, horrible, no taller than an ell, thin as skeletons, were overtaking the other side of the ravine. They moved onto the bridge with a bizarre gait like a heron's, lifting their swollen knees very high in abrupt movements. Bilious eyes bulged from flat and wrinkled faces. Their small frog-like mouths sported tiny pearly fangs. They approached, hissing.

The stranger, still as a statue in the center of the bridge, suddenly lifted his right hand with his fingers positioned strangely. The monstrous dwarves retreated, hissing, before quickly resuming their approach, faster and faster, raising their long, grasping, stick-thin limbs.

From the left came the sound of claws: a new monster appeared suddenly from under the bridge; the others pounced, in stupefying leaps. The stranger turned. The new sword flashed. The head of the creature that climbed from the bridge flew six feet into the air, trailing a garland of blood behind it. The white-haired man bounded into the group that remained. He struck, whirling his sword right and left. The monsters hurled themselves at him from all sides, screaming, flailing their limbs; the sword, bright and sharp as a razor, did not discourage them. Yurga huddled against the cart.

Something fell at his feet, covered in blood. It was a long bony leg with four claws, scaled like a hen's.

The merchant screamed.

He felt a stealthy presence next to him. He curled up as if to disappear under the carriage. The ghastly thing then fell upon his neck: the large clawed leg gripped him at his temple and his cheek. Yurga closed his eyes. He tore himself away from the monster, screaming and slashing at the body; he found himself in the middle of the bridge, surrounded by corpses lying on the planks. The battle raged. The merchant saw nothing except the raging tumult and confusion from which emerged, from time to time, an arc of silver light.

"Help!" he yelled, feeling the sharp fangs pierce his hood and engulf the back of his skull.

"Get your head down!"

He pressed his chin to his chest, searching with his gaze for the quick strike of the blade. The sword sang through the air, brushing his hood. Yurga heard a wet and terrible crack. A hot liquid spilled like a bucket across his shoulders. A dead weight around his neck forced both his knees to the ground.

The merchant saw three other monsters spring from under the bridge. Leaping like locusts, they seized the stranger's legs. One of them, its frog face split by a blow, staggered rigidly away before falling to the planks. The second, pierced by the tip of the sword, collapsed into spasms. The others surrounded the white-haired man like ants, driving him to the side of the bridge. The third monster was thrown, bleeding, screaming and convulsing, from the fray. The disordered horde rolled at the same moment over the edge of the bridge and into the ravine. Yurga fell to the ground, protecting his head with his hands.

Under the bridge, the merchant heard the triumphant clamor of the monsters give way to the hissing of the sword, screaming and moans of pain. Then there came from the darkness a clanging of stones followed by the crackle

of crushed and smashed skeletons, and again the whistle of a sword and a final, desperate, blood-curdling croaking, prematurely interrupted.

It was then that the silence was punctuated here and there, among the trees deep in the

woods, by the frightened cry of a bird. Then even the birds were silent.

Yurga swallowed hard and sat up slightly, lifting his head. The silence still reigned. Not even the leaves of the trees made a sound.

The forest seemed to have become mute with terror. Frayed clouds darkened the sky.

"Hey!"

The merchant turned, instinctively protecting himself with his hands. The witcher was standing before him, motionless, black, holding his shining sword at arm's length. Yurga noticed that he did not stand up straight, he leaned to one side.

"Lord, have you made it?"

The witcher did not respond. He took a heavy and awkward step, touching his left hip, and reached out to hold on to the side of the cart. Yurga noticed black and shining blood dripping onto the planks.

"Lord, you're injured!"

The witcher did not respond. He clung to the side of the cart, locking eyes with the merchant, and then slid slowly onto the bridge.

II

"Easy, careful... Under the head... One of you support his head!"

"Here, here, on the cart!"

"By the gods, the lord... Master Yurga, he's bleeding through the dressing..."

"Stop jabbering! Come on, hurry up! Profit, the nerve! Cover him with furs, and you, Veil, don't you see that he's shaking?"

"Perhaps he could be given some vodka!"

"Wounded and unconscious? Are you mad, Veil? Pass me the bottle instead: I need a drink... Dogs, scoundrels, miserable cowards! Running away like that and leaving me alone!"

"Master Yurga! He said something!"

"What? What did he say?"

"I'm not sure... A name..."

"What name?"

"Yennefer..."

Ill

"Where am I?"

"Don't get up, sir, don't move, or everything will reopen and tear. Those horrible creatures must have bitten the thigh down to the bone. You lost a lot of blood... Don't you recognize me? Yurga! The man you saved on the bridge, don't you remember?"

"Ah..."

"Are you thirsty?"

"By the devil, yes..."

"Drink, my lord, drink. You're consumed by fever."

"Yurga... where are we?"

"We're on the road, in my cart. Don't say anything, my lord, don't move. We must cross the forests to reach the first human settlements and find a healer. Your dressing isn't enough. The blood won't stop flowing..."

"Yurga..."

"Yes, my lord?"

"In my chest... a flask... sealed with green wax. Break the seal and give it to me... in a goblet. No-one must touch the flask... if you value your life... Quick, Yurga... Damn, but this cart can shake... The flask, Yurga..."

"Here... drink."

"Thank you... Pay close attention. I'm going to fall asleep. I will be thrashing and raving, and then still as a corpse. It's nothing, don't be afraid..."

"Sleep, lord, otherwise your wound will reopen and you'll lose all your blood."

He sank into the furs. His head reeled. He felt that the merchant had covered him with a coat and a blanket that smelled of horse sweat. The cart jolted. Each bump hit his thigh and hip painfully. He gritted his teeth. Above him, he saw millions of stars. So close that it seemed that it would be enough to reach above his head, just above the line of the trees, to touch them.

He chose to follow the path farthest from the light, from the glow of fires, to hide in the areas of swaying shadow. It wasn't easy: all around were burning pyres of pine, dotting the sky with the red light of torches, adding their banners of smoke to the darkness, crackling and flaring with light between the dancing silhouettes.

Geralt stopped to allow the passage of the procession - mad, screaming, savage - that approached him and blocked any escape. Someone seized his shoulder and tried to give him a small cup filled with foam. He refused

politely, but firmly pushed away the staggering man who carried a barrel of watered beer around to the people. He did not drink.

Not tonight.

Not far away, on a stage built from the trunks of birch trees that overlooked the huge bonfire, the fair-haired King of May, wearing a crown of flowers and branches, kissed the Queen of May; he caressed her breasts through her thin, sweat-drenched tunic. The monarch, very drunk, staggered and could not keep his balance without holding onto the queen, holding a nice mug of beer in the fist at his back. The queen was not sober either. Encircled by a wreath of flowers that was falling over her eyes, she clung to the neck of the king and kicked up her legs. The crowd danced on the stage, singing, shouting, and waving branches twined with flowers and vines.

"Belleteyn!" a girl cried into Geralt's ear.

Tugging at his sleeve, she forced him to join the procession that surrounded him. She danced beside him: her robe and the flowers in her hair fluttered in the breeze. He allowed her to draw him into the dance. He whirled deftly, allowing the other couples to pass.

"Belleteyn! It's the night of May!"

Next to them, a scuffle broke out, the cries and nervous laughter of a girl struggling against a boy who carried her off into the dark, outside the circle of light. The procession, shouting, followed a path between the burning fires. Sometimes, someone stumbled, falling and breaking the chain of linked arms that then branched out into small groups.

The eyes of the girl, piercing through the leaves that adorned her brow, were watching Geralt. She approached and hugged herself forcefully against his shoulders. He gave a blunt refusal. Her fingers pressed the wetness of her body through the fine linen. She lifted her head, closing her eyes. Her teeth gleamed brilliantly below her slightly raised lip. The girl gave off the smell of sweat and sweet grass, of smoke and desire.

Why not, he thought, crumpling the back of her dress. His hands delighted in the humid and ethereal heat. The young woman was certainly not his type: too small, too tightly-wrapped. He felt with his fingers where the too-tight dress divided her body into two sharp curves, just where he should not feel them. But why not, during a night like this... it doesn't matter.

Belleteyn... The fires on the horizon. The night of May.

Nearest to the stake, engulfing the bundles of dry resin that launched the flames, the yellow glow intensified, flooding the area with light. The girl met Geralt's eyes. He heard her inhale sharply. Her body suddenly tensed; her fingers curled abruptly against the witcher's chest. Geralt released his companion. She hesitated at first, then moved her body away without immediately giving up the contact between her hips the witcher's thigh. Avoiding his gaze, her head bowed, she withdrew her hands before taking a step back.

They were still for a moment. The return of the procession did not absorb them, did not shake them, did not hurry them. The girl awkwardly turned and ran, losing herself in the mass of other dancers. She cast a furtive glance back.

Belleteyn...

But what am I doing here ?

A star shone, twinkling in the dark. Blinding. The amulet around the witcher's neck began to tingle. Geralt instinctively dilated his pupils to pierce the darkness without difficulty.

The woman was not a peasant. The country girls were not wearing black velvet cloaks. The country girls were pushed or dragged by the men into the bushes, crying out, giggling, wriggling and trembling like freshly-caught fish. None of them gave the impression that they were in control of the situation: this woman was taking a companion into the dark, a man with blond hair and his shirt half open.

The country girls never wore a velvet ribbon around their necks or an obsidian star encrusted with diamonds.

"Yennefer."

Her violet eyes burned in a pale , triangular face.

"Geralt..." '

She released the hand of the blond angel whose torso gleamed with sweat like a copper plate. The boy hesitated, staggered, fell to his knees, turned his head, looked around, protested. Then he rose slowly, considering them with a look that was at once skeptical and embarrassed, and walked off toward the fires. The sorceress didn't even look at him. She stared intently at the witcher. Her hand trembled on the edge of her cloak.

"It's good to see you again," he said without emotion.

He felt then that the tension between them had fallen.

"Same," she replied, smiling. It seemed that the smile contained something forced, but he wasn't sure. "This is a pleasant surprise, I agree. What are you doing here, Geralt? Oh! Pardon me, excuse my indiscretion. Of course you are here for the same thing I am. This is the feast of Belleteyn. The difference being that you have caught me, one might say, in the act."

"I've disturbed you."

"I'll live," she joked. "The night will go on. If I like, I can seduce another."

"A pity that I don't know how," he managed to say, feigning indifference.

"A girl saw my eyes in the light and ran away."

"In the morning," she replied, smiling in an even more artificial way, "when they really go mad, they won't pay so much attention. You'll find another, you'll see..."

"Yen..."

The rest of the sentence caught in his throat.

They looked at each other for a long time, a very long time. The red glow of the fire danced over their faces. Yennefer sighed suddenly, veiling her eyes under their lashes.

"Geralt, no. Don't start..."

"It's Belleteyn," he interrupted, "did you forget?"

She approached slowly, put a hand on his shoulder and pressed gently against him,

curling herself gently against his chest. He stroked the raven-black hair that fell in curls like snakes.

"Believe me," she murmured, lifting her face, "I wouldn't hesitate for a moment if it were only a question of... but there's no sense in it. Everything would begin again and end as it did before. There's no sense in us..."

"Must everything make sense? It's Belleteyn."

"Belleteyn?" She turned her face. "What difference does that make? Something drew us to these fires and these celebrating people. We intended to dance, to let loose, to get a little drunk and vigorously enjoy freedom from good manners here, in honor of the renewal of the cycle of nature. And what? We trip over each other after... how much time has passed? After... a year?"

"One year, two months and eighteen days."

"I'm touched. Do you do that on purpose?"

"Yes, Yen..."

"Geralt," she interrupted, leaning back suddenly and shaking her head, "let me be clear: it's impossible."

He confirmed with a nod of his head that this was clear.

Yennefer pushed her cloak back from her shoulders. She wore a thin white blouse and a black skirt held by a belt of silver links.

"I don't want to start again," she repeated. "And the idea of doing with you... what I intended to do with the handsome blond... under the same rules... that idea, Geralt, I find demeaning. Degrading for you and for me. Understand?"

He nodded again. She looked at him, through her lowered lashes.

"You aren't going?"

"No."

She remained silent for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"You're offended?"

"No."

"Come, let's sit down somewhere, away from the chaos. Talk a little. You see, I'm glad that we met. It's the truth. Let's sit a moment. Agreed?"

"All right, Yen."

They left in the dark, away from the bonfire, toward the dark edge of the forest, careful to avoid the embracing couples. To find a quiet place, they had to walk for a while. They stopped on a dry hill flanked by a juniper bush as slender as a cypress.

The sorceress unclasped her brooch and spread her cloak over the ground after shaking it out. He sat next to her. He longed to take her shoulders, but it would only annoy her. Yennefer rebuttoned her wide-open blouse, with Geralt watching attentively. She sighed, holding herself against him. Geralt knew that Yennefer had to make a great effort to read thoughts, but that she instinctively sensed the intentions of others.

They were silent.

"Oh, by the plague!" she cried suddenly, breaking free of his embrace.

The sorceress lifted her arms and recited an incantation. Over their heads rose bubbles of red and green that burst high in the air and formed feathery red flowers. Laughter and cries of joy reached them from the fires.

"Belleteyn," she said bitterly. "The night of May... The cycle repeats itself. They have fun, if they can..."

There were other sorcerers in the area. Three orange flashes rang out in the distance; on the other side, at the foot of the forest, a geyser of rainbow-colored meteors twirled into the sky and exploded. The dancers near the fire cried out in admiration. Feeling tense, Geralt caressed Yennefer's curls and inhaled the scent of lilac and gooseberry they gave off. If I

want her too much, he thought, she will sense it; it might upset her. I'll ask her quietly if it's all right.

"It's nothing new to me," she said. Something trembled nonetheless in her voice. "Nothing worth mentioning."

"Don't do that to me, Yen. Don't read my mind. It bothers me."

"Forgive me. It's instinctive. And you, Geralt, what's new?"

"Nothing, nothing worth mentioning."

They remained silent.

"Belleteyn!" she cried suddenly. Geralt felt the shoulders pressed against his chest rise and fall. "They have fun. They celebrate the eternal cycle of nature. And us? What do we do? We, the relics, those condemned to death, to extermination and oblivion. Nature is reborn, the cycle repeats itself. But not us, Geralt. We can't perpetuate ourselves. We are denied that possibility. We have inherited the gift to do extraordinary things with nature, sometimes against it, but we have been deprived in return of what is most simple and natural. What does it matter that we live longer than humans? There is no

spring after the winter; we are not reborn, our end carries us with it. But something draws us to the fires, even though our presence is a cruel joke, a sacrilege against this festival."

She fell silent. He didn't like to see her fall into such darkness. He knew too well the reason for it. It's starting to gnaw at her again, he thought. There had been a time when it seemed that she had forgotten or accepted her fate. He moved his shoulders, rocking her like a child. She did not resist. Geralt wasn't surprised; he knew that she needed it.

"You know, Geralt," she said, suddenly calm, "it's your silence that I've missed the most."

He pressed his lips to her hair, her ears. / want you, Yen, he thought, / want you, you know that. You know it well, Yen.

"I know," she murmured.

"Yen..."

"Only for now," she replied, watching him with wide-open eyes. "Only on this night that will soon disappear. That will be our Belleteyn. We will part in the morning. I beg you, don't count on anything more. I can't... I couldn't. Forgive me. If I hurt you, kiss me and let me go."

"If I kiss you, I'm not leaving."

"That's what I thought."

She bowed her head. Geralt kissed her parted lips. Cautiously: first the upper lip, then the lower. His hands tangled in her curls, touched her ears, the gems in the lobes, her neck. Returning his kiss, Yennefer drew herself to him; her nimble fingers had no trouble defeating the clasps of his jacket.

She slid back on the cloak arranged over the moss. Geralt kissed her breasts. He felt the nipples harden and rise up under the fine fabric of her blouse. Yennefer was breathing raggedly.

"Yen..."

"Don't say anything, please."

The touch of her bare skin, sweet and cold, electrified his palm and his fingers. Geralt's back shuddered under Yennefer's nails. Shouting, singing, whistling reached them all the while from the fires, in a distant whirlwind of sparks and purple smoke. Embraces, caresses. Him, her. Chills. And impatience. He touched the slender thighs closed around his hips that shook like a leaf.

Belleteyn!

Breaths and sighs began their ballet; lightning flashed before their eyes; the scent of lilac and gooseberry enveloped them. The King and the Queen of May, was it the expression

of a sacrilegious joke? Of oblivion?

It's Belleteyn, the night of May!

A piercing groan from Yen or from Geralt; black curls covering their eyes and mouths; trembling fingers entwined in their tightly-grasped hands. A cry; black lashes, damp; a groan.

Then silence. An eternity of silence.

Belleteyn... The fires on the horizon...

"Yen?"

"Oh... Geralt."

"Yen, are you crying?"

"No!"

"Yen..."

"I had promised myself... I had..."

"Don't say anything. It doesn't matter. Aren't you cold?"

"Yes."

"And now?"

"Warmer."

The sky cleared at a dizzying speed. The black wall of the forest regained its contours: the jagged line of the ridge of trees emerged from the indistinct darkness. Behind her, the azure announcement of dawn poured over the horizon, extinguishing the stars. It got colder. Geralt held Yennefer tighter. He covered her with his coat.

"Geralt?"

"Hmm..."

"The day will break."

"I know."

"Have I hurt you?"

"A little."

"Will it start all over?"

"Nothing ever stopped."

"Please... I feel good with you..."

"Don't say anything. Everything's fine."

The smell of smoke was rising from the heather. The smell of lilac and gooseberries.

"Geralt?"

"Yes?"

"Do you remember when we met the Great Mountain Kestrel? And the golden dragon? What was his name?"

"Three Kestrels. I remember."

"He told us..."

"I remember, Yen."

She kissed the back of his neck, pinning his head and tickling him with her hair.

"We were made for each other," she murmured. "Perhaps even destined for each other. But none of this can happen. It's a shame. We will have to separate when the day breaks. It can't be otherwise. We have to separate so as not to hurt each other: destined for each other, made for each other, but the one who created us should have thought of something more. Forgive me. I had to tell you."

"I know."

"Making love makes no sense."

"You're mistaken."

"Go back to Cintra, Geralt."

"What?"

"Go to Cintra. Go, and this time don't give up. Don't repeat the mistake from last time..."

"How do you know?"

"I know everything about you. Have you forgotten? Go to Cintra, go as fast as possible. A dark time approaches. Very dark. You must get there in time..."

"Yen..."

"No, don't say anything, please."

It was more and more fresh and more and more clear.

"Don't go now. Wait for the dawn."

"We'll wait."

IV

"Don't get up, lord. Your dressing needs to be changed, because the wound is dirty and your leg is horribly swollen. By the gods, it's awful... We need to find a healer as soon as possible..."

"To hell with healers!" groaned the witcher. "Give me my chest, Yurga. Yes, this flask. Pour it directly on the wound. Oh! By the plague and cholera! It's nothing, add more... Oh! That's good. Dress it and cover me..."

"It's swollen, lord, the whole thigh... And you're stricken with fever..."

"To hell with the fever... Yurga?"

"Yes, lord?"

"I forgot to thank you..."

"I'm not the one who should be thanked, lord, but you. It's you who saved my life. You have been injured in defending me. And me? What have I done? I only tended to an injured and unconscious man. I carried him in my cart and kept him from perishing. It's an ordinary thing, master witcher."

"Not so ordinary as that, Yurga. I have been abandoned in similar situations, like a dog..."

The merchant was silent, bowing his head.

"Yes... it happens. The world around us is horrible," he murmured at last. "But that's not a reason for all of us to behave so execrably. Good is necessary. That's what my father taught me and that's what I will teach my sons."

The witcher fell silent. He watched the tree branches that hung over the road and disappeared with the movement of the cart. His thigh came back to life. The pain was gone.

"Where are we?"

"We have just forded the Trava river. We are actually in the woods of Alkekenge. It's no longer Temeria, but Sodden. You were sleeping when we crossed the border and when customs officers searched the cart. I must tell you that they were surprised to find you there. But the oldest one knew you and they allowed us to go through."

"He knew me?"

"Yes, without a doubt. He called you Geralt. That's what he said: Geralt of Rivia. Isn't that your name?"

"So..."

"He promised to send someone ahead with word that a healer was needed. I gave him a little something so that he doesn't forget."

"I thank you, Yurga."

"No, lord. I already said: it's I who thank you. And that's not all. I am still in your

debt. We agreed... What's happening, lord? Are you losing your strength?"

"Yurga, give me the flask with the green seal..."

"Lord, you're going to go back... You cried out so terribly in your sleep..."

"I need it, Yurga..."

"As you wish. Wait while I pour it into a goblet... By the gods, we need a healer, as soon as possible, because otherwise..."

The witcher turned his head. He heard the cries of children playing in the ditch, drained, next to the castle gardens. There were a dozen of them. The kids made a devil of a racket, shouting to each others in their little falsettos, shrill and excited. They ran up and down the bottom of the ditch, resembling a school of small fish ceaselessly changing direction, but managing to stay together. As is always the case in these situations, a smaller one, out of breath, was trying to catch up with the gang of older ones, thin as scarecrows, who wrestled and shouted.

"There are a lot of them," the witcher remarked.

Mousesack gave him a forced smile, pulling on his beard and shrugging.

"Yes, a lot."

"And one of them... Which one of these boys is the famous surprise?"

"I can't, Geralt..."

"Calanthe?"

"Of course. You don't believe, I hope, that she would give you a child so easily? You know that, don't you? She is a woman of iron. I'll tell you something that I should not admit. In the hope that you understand... I'm also counting on you not to betray me to her."

"Speak."

"When the child was born six years ago, she called for me and ordered me to find you. To kill you."

"You refused."

"We refuse nothing to Calanthe," Mousesack replied seriously, looking him right in the eye. "I was ready to set out before she called me back. She revoked the order without comment. Be careful when you talk to her."

"I will be. Mousesack, tell me: what happened to Duny and Pavetta?"

"They were sailing to Skellig from Cintra when a storm surprised them. Nothing was recovered of the boat, not even some boards. Geralt... the fact that the child was not aboard with them is maddeningly strange. Incomprehensible. They had to take it with them on the ship, but they changed their minds at the last moment. No-one knows why. Pavetta was never apart from..."

"How did Calanthe handle this misfortune?"

"How do you think?"

"I see."

Hurling expletives, the children climbed like a band of goblins to the top of the ditch and immediately disappeared. Geralt noticed a little girl, just as thin and noisy as the boys, but with a plait of fair hair, keeping her distance from the head of the small group. With a savage cry, the little band slipped down the steep slope of the ditch again. At least half of them, the girl included, fell on their backsides. The youngest, still unable to catch up to the others, somersaulted and fell to the bottom where he began to bawl hot tears and rub his scraped knee. The other boys stood by, railing at him and laughing before resuming their course. The little girl knelt next to the boy, took him in her arms and dried his eyes, wiping the dust and dirt from a face grimacing in pain.

"Come on, Geralt. The queen awaits."

"So be it, Mousesack."

Calanthe was sitting on a wooden bench with a backrest, which was suspended by

chains from one of the main branches of an enormous linden tree. It seemed that she was napping, save for the small kick of her foot she gave from time to time to revive the swing. Three young women remained at her side. One was sitting on the grass near the swing. Her dress fanned over the grass and

formed a white spot on the green, like a patch of snow. The other two were arguing further away, delicately picking strawberries.

"Madam," said Mousesack, bowing.

The queen lifted her head. Geralt knelt.

"Witcher," she responded drily.

As before, the queen wore emeralds matching the green of her dress and her eyes. As before, a thin gold crown encircled her ash-gray hair. But her hands, which he remembered as thin and white, were not as thin as before. Calanthe had put on weight.

"Hail, Calanthe of Cintra."

"I bid you welcome, Geralt of Rivia. Rise. I was waiting. Mousesack, please accompany the girls to the castle."

"At your service, my queen."

They were left alone.

"Six years," Calanthe said without smiling. "You are terribly punctual, witcher."

He made no comment.

"At times, no, for years at a time, I deluded myself that you might forget. Or that for other reasons you might be prevented from coming. No, I didn't want anything unfortunate to happen to you, but I had to take into consideration the dangerous nature of your profession. It is said that death follows in your footsteps, Geralt of Rivia, but that you never look behind you. Then... when Pavetta... You know already?"

"I know," Geralt said, inclining his head. "My sincere condolences..."

"No," she interrupted, "it was all long ago. I no longer wear mourning clothes, as you see. I wore them for long enough. Pavetta and Duny... were

destined for each other to the end. How can I deny the power of destiny?"

They fell silent. Calanthe, with a kick, revived the swing.

"And so it is that the witcher returned after the agreed-upon period," she said slowly. A strange smile bloomed on her lips. "He returned, requiring that the oath be respected. What do you think, Geralt? It's probably in this manner that the storytellers will recount our meeting in a hundred years. With the difference that they will embellish the story, striking a chord and toying with the emotions. Yes, they know their work well. I can imagine it. Listen, if you would:

"And the cruel witcher said at last: 'Respect your oath, Queen, or my curse will be upon you.' The queen, in tears, fell at the feet of the witcher, crying, 'Mercy! Do not take that child from me! He is all I have!'"

"Calanthe..."

"Don't interrupt me, please," she replied drily. "Haven't you noticed that I am telling a story? Listen closer:

"The cruel and vicious witcher stamped his foot and waved his arms, shouting: 'Beware, perjurer. You will not escape your punishment if you do not respect your oath.' The queen responded: 'So be it, witcher. Let it be done according to destiny. Look over there: a dozen children are playing. Recognize the one destined for you. Take that one and leave me alone, with a broken heart.'" The witcher was silent. Calanthe's smile grew more and more ugly.

"In this story, the queen, I imagine, offers three chances to the witcher. But we do not live in the world of fairy tales, Geralt. We are indeed real, you, me, and our problem. And so is our destiny. This is not a story being told, it is a life at stake. Sickening, cruel, arduous, sparing neither error and prejudice, nor regret and misery, and sparing neither witchers nor

queens. That is why, Geralt of Rivia, you will be granted only one attempt."

The witcher had not yet flinched.

"One single attempt," repeated Calanthe. "I said before: we are not characters in a story, this is real life where we must find our own moments of happiness, because, you know, we can hardly count on a happy ending. That is why, regardless of your choice, you will not leave empty-handed. You will take a child. Whichever you have chosen. A child that you will turn into a witcher... provided that he passes the trial of Herbs, of course."

Geralt lifted his head abruptly. The queen was still smiling. He knew that smile, ugly and vicious, contemptuous and concealing none of her artifice.

"I've surprised you," she said. "I gave the matter some study. Since there was a chance that Pavetta's child might become a witcher, I put myself to the trouble. However, my sources did not inform me of the proportion of children, out of ten, who can pass the trial of Herbs. Would you like to satisfy my curiosity in this area?"

"My queen," Geralt began, clearing his throat. "Without a doubt you must have taken sufficient pains in your studies to know that my code and my witcher's oath forbid me from uttering the word, let alone from discussing it."

Calanthe violently stopped the movement of the swing, planting her heels in the ground.

"Three, at most four out of ten," she explained, feigning concentration with a nod of her head. "A difficult selection, very difficult, I would say, and that at each stage. First, the choice, then that of the test. And finally the changes. How many rogues ultimately receive the medallion and the silver sword? One in ten? One in twenty?"

The witcher remained silent.

"I have given the matter a lot of thought," Calanthe went on, abandoning her smile. "I came to the conclusion that the stage of the choice is incidental. What difference does it make, Geralt, that one child and not another dies or goes mad as a result of a massive dose of drugs? What difference does it make if the mind is destroyed or consumed by delusions, or the eyes explode instead of becoming the eyes of a cat? In light of the

blood or the sickness preceding his death, what difference does it make whether one child or another was truly destined by providence or was perfectly inappropriate? Tell me." The witcher folded his hands across his chest to control their trembling.

"To what end?" he asked. "Do you expect an answer?"

"No, I don't expect that." The queen smiled again. "As always, you remain infallible in your conclusions. Who knows whether I, in response to your answer, might graciously deign to devote a little of my attention to the sincerity and the truthfulness of your words? The words that you speak might - who knows? - lift with them the weight on your spirit. If not, oh well, let's get to work providing the material for the storytellers and go choose a child, witcher."

"Calanthe," he responded, fixing his eyes on the queen. "What do the storytellers matter to us? If they don't get any material, then they will invent something. And even if they have access to some authentic source, you know perfectly well that they will distort it. As you yourself rightly remarked, this is not a fairy tale, but life, sickening and cruel, through which we are trying, by the plague and cholera, to live decently and to strictly limit the amount of harm we inflict on others. In one tale, the queen must actually beg the witcher and he responds by stamping his foot. In life, the queen could simply say: 'Do not take this child, please.' And the witcher answered: 'Since you insist, my queen, so be it.' He then resumed his journey at dusk. Such is life. The storyteller would not get a cent from his audience if he told such nonsense. At most, a kick in the rear. Because it's boring."

Calanthe stopped smiling. He saw something else shining in her eyes.

"And so?" she growled.

"Let's end this game of hide and seek, Calanthe. You know what I think. I will leave just as I arrived. Choose a child? What do you take me for? You think that this is so important to me? That I came to Cintra, tormented by an obsession with taking your little child from you? No, Calanthe. I simply

wanted to see the child, to look into the eyes of destiny... Myself, I don't know... Don't be afraid. I will not take it. You had only to ask..."

Calanthe jumped up violently from the swing. A green light burned in her eyes.

"Ask?" she growled, furious. "Of you? Me, afraid? Afraid of you, cursed sorcerer? You dare to turn your expression of contemptuous pity on me? You dare insult me with your condescension! You reproach me for my cowardice! You disobey my will! My kindness to you unleashes your insolence! Beware!"

The witcher decided not to shrug his shoulders: it was more prudent to kneel and prostrate himself. He did.

"Well," Calanthe growled, standing over him. Her arms were swinging, fists clenched around the spikes of her rings. "Finally. This is a more appropriate position. It is in this position that one answers to a queen when she requires a response. And if instead of a question, it's an order that I give you, you will bow down even lower and hasten without delay to obey it. Understood?"

"Yes, my queen."

"Perfect. Get up."

He stood up. She looked at him, biting her lips.

"My outburst of anger has not offended you? I ask regarding its form, not its content."

"No."

"Good. I will try not to explode again. As I told you, ten children play there in the ditch. Choose the one that seems to you the most suitable. Take him with you and by the gods make him a witcher, because that is the will of destiny. And if not of destiny, know that it is my will."

He looked her in the eye and bowed very low.

"My queen," he said, "six years ago, I showed you that there exist things more powerful than the royal will. By the gods, if such things really exist, I will prove it once more. You will not force me to make a choice I do not want to make. Pardon the form, not the content."

"The depths of my castle dungeon are riddled with cells. I warn you: one more moment, one more word, and you will rot."

"None of the children playing in the ditch is suited to become a witcher," he said slowly. "The son of Pavetta is not among them."

Calanthe blinked, but did not waver.

"Come," she said finally, turning on her heel.

He followed her through the flowering bushes, the clumps and hedges. The queen entered a sunlit gazebo. Four rattan chairs surrounded a malachite table. On the streaked tabletop supported by four fierce griffons, there sat a pitcher and two small cups.

"Have a seat and pour."

She drank, without pretension, heavily, like a man. He did the same, but remained standing.

"Sit down," she repeated. "I want to talk."

"I'm listening."

"How did you know that the son of Pavetta was not found among those children?"

"I don't know." Geralt opted for sincerity. "I said it at random."

"Ah? I might have guessed. And none of them is suited to become a witcher, is that the truth? How can you tell? By magic?"

"Calanthe," he answered in a soft voice, "I could neither confirm nor deny it. What

you said earlier was the simple truth: every child is capable. The trials decide. Later."

"By the gods of the sea, in the words of my late husband," she declared, laughing, "it is all false! Including the law of surprise! The legends of children nobody expected and for whom the claimants return at the appointed time. I thought so! It's a game! A game of chance and fate! But all this is diabolically dangerous, Geralt."

"I know."

"A game that causes harm. Why, tell me, do you force the parents or guardians to make such difficult promises? Why take their children? There are so many, everywhere, there is no need to take them. The roads swarm with orphans and vagabonds. In any village, it is easy to buy an infant on the cheap. During the drought before the harvest, any serf will sell his children willingly. What does he care? A new one is already on the way. Why demand an oath of Duny, of Pavetta and myself? Why appear six years to the day after the birth of the child? And why, by cholera, don't you want it now? Why tell me that you won't take it?"

Geralt remained silent. Calanthe nodded her head.

"You don't answer," she concluded, letting herself fall against the back of her chair. "Attempt to elucidate the reason behind your silence for me. Logic being the mother of all knowledge, what does she suggest in this matter? What do we have at our disposal? A witcher on a quest for destiny hidden in a strange and unlikely surprise. The witcher discovers that destiny and then abruptly renounces it, saying that he no longer wants the child-surprise. His face remains utterly impassive and his voice resonates with the coolness of glass and metal. The witcher thinks that the queen, a woman after all, will allow herself to be tricked and in the end will cede to his masculinity. No, Geralt, don't wait for me to show weakness. I know why you renounce your choice of a child. You renounce it because you do not believe in destiny, because you are not certain. And when you're not sure... it's fear that takes over. Yes, Geralt, fear is your engine. Fear is your cargo. Dare to say otherwise."

He slowly pushed the cup on the table so that the clink of silver on malachite would not betray the uncontrollable trembling of his arm.

"You don't deny it?"

"No."

She bent to seize his hand with vigor.

"You disappoint me," she said, giggling prettily.

"This isn't voluntary," he responded, laughing as well. "How did you guess, Calanthe?"

"I did not guess." She did not release his hand. "I said it at random, that's all."

They broke out in laughter.

They settled into silence in the greenery and the smell of the clusters of cherries, in the heat and the buzzing of bees.

"Geralt?"

"Yes, Calanthe?"

"You do not believe in destiny?"

"I don't know if I believe in anything. As for destiny... I think that it is not enough. There must be something more."

"I must ask you a question on this point: what was your story? It is said that you were a child-surprise. Mousesack said..."

"No, Calanthe. Mousesack had something else in mind. Mousesack undoubtedly knows... but he resorts to legend when it suits him. I was never the thing that one does not expect to find on his return. It is wrong to say that I became a witcher for that reason. I was an ordinary orphan, Calanthe, a kid that his mother, whom he does not remember, did not want. But I know who she is."

The queen was all ears, but Geralt did not continue.

"Are all the stories about the law of surprise also legends?"

"All of them. How can one know whether something is chance or destiny?"

"But you, the witchers, you keep looking."

"We don't stop. But that makes no sense. Nothing makes sense."

"You believe that a child of providence will safely pass the tests?"

"We believe that such a child would not need to pass the tests."

"One more question, Geralt, quite personal. Do you mind?"

He nodded his acquiescence.

"It is known that there is no better way to pass on hereditary traits than in the natural way. If you seek a child possessed of such qualities and such strength, why not look for a woman who... I am being indelicate, no? But it seems to me that I've hit my mark."

"As always," he responded with a sad smile, "you remain infallible, Calanthe. You have hit upon it, to be sure. What you suggest is impossible for me."

"Forgive me." Her smile disappeared. "In the end, it's only human."

"A witcher isn't human."

"Ah? And so, no witcher..."

"None. The trial of Herbs, Calanthe, is horrible. And what is irreversibly done to young boys during the changes is even more so."

"Stop lamenting your fate," she grumbled. "This is not like you. It doesn't matter what you've been subjected to. The result in my eyes is quite evident. If I knew that Pavetta's child would become someone like you, I wouldn't hesitate an instant."

"The risk is very large," he said quickly. "It's just as you said: four in ten survive."

"By the devil! Is there only danger in the event of these changes? Only the future witchers take risks? Life is full of hazards, Geralt. Life, too, is governed by selection: accidents, diseases, wars. Opposing destiny is perhaps as dangerous as abandoning it. Geralt... I would voluntarily give you this child, but.. I am also afraid."

"I will not take it. It is too great a responsibility, one that I refuse to assume. I would not want for this child to speak about you the way... the way I..."

"You hate this woman, Geralt?"

"My mother? No, Calanthe. I doubt that she was given a choice... or perhaps she had no say? No, she had, you know, enough formulas and

elixirs... Choice. There is a sacred and incontestable choice of every woman that must be respected. Emotions are of no importance here. She had the indisputable right to make such a choice. That's what she did. But I think about meeting her, the expression on her face then... it gives me a sort of perverse pleasure, if you understand what I mean."

"I understand what you say perfectly," she replied, smiling. "But the chances of this happening are slim. I can't judge your age, witcher, but I suspect that you're much older than you appear. And so this woman..."

"This woman," he interrupted, "must now look much younger than I do."

"A sorceress?"

"Yes."

"Interesting. I thought that sorceresses could not..."

"She no doubt thought the same thing."

"No doubt. But you're right... Let's not speak any more about the right of a woman to decide. This is not the subject at hand. Returning to our problem. You will not take a child? This is final?"

"Final."

"What if... destiny was not a myth? If it truly exists, do you not fear that it will take revenge?"

"If destiny takes vengeance, it will be on me," he replied calmly. "It is I who attack it."

You have fulfilled your duty in this matter. If destiny proved not to be a legend, I would then find the child from those you showed me. The child of Pavetta is among them?"

"Yes." Calanthe inclined her head slowly. "Would you like to look into the eyes of destiny?"

"No. I don't care. I withdraw and renounce my claim on the boy. How can I see the face of destiny when I don't believe in it? To unite two individuals, I think, destiny is not enough. It takes something more. Should I follow, groping along like a blind man, naive and uncomprehending? I have no respect for such destiny. My decision is irrevocable, Calanthe of Cintra."

The queen rose, smiling. The witcher could not divine what that smile concealed.

"So be it, Geralt of Rivia. Perhaps destiny willed that you withdraw and renounce your claim. I am, for my part, convinced. If you had chosen the right child, the destiny that you mock might have cruelly mocked you in return."

He saw irony in those green eyes. She continued to wear an indecipherable smile. A rosebush grew next to the gazebo. Geralt plucked a flower, breaking its stem and then knelt, his head bowed, presenting the flower in his hands.

"I regret that I did not meet you sooner, white-haired one," she said, accepting the offered rose. "Rise."

He rose.

"If you change your mind," she went on, sniffing the flower, "if you decide... Return to Cintra. I will wait for you. Your destiny will be waiting for you, as well. Perhaps not *ad vitam aeternam*, but for some time, no doubt."

"Farewell, Calanthe." "Farewell, witcher. Look after yourself. I... I sometimes feel... in a strange way... that I am seeing you for the last time."

"Farewell, my queen."

Geralt awoke and discovered with astonishment that the stinging pain in his thigh had disappeared. It seemed that the swelling had also diminished. He wanted to check with his hands, but he could not lift them. Before he could understand that the weight of the fur blankets prevented him from moving,

a horrible icy anxiety seized his stomach with talons like a hawk's. He extended and relaxed his fingers and repeated silently, no, no, I'm not...

Paralyzed.

"You're awake."

It was an observation, not a question, made in a voice that was clear and sweet. A woman. Young, certainly. He turned his head and mumbled something about trying to get up.

"Don't move. Not so roughly, anyway. Are you in pain?"

"Nnn..." The sticky lips tore. "Nnno. Only hurts... back."

"A bed sore," the gentle alto voice diagnosed, with open chilliness. "Leave it to me. Come, drink this. Easy, in slow sips."

The taste and smell of juniper dominated the beverage. An old trick, he thought. Juniper or mint to mask the true composition. He recognized coustaire and perhaps some button-heart. Yes, the button-heart was doubtlessly to neutralize the toxins and purify the blood poisoned by gangrene or infection.

"Drink. Drain the cup dry. Slower, or you'll choke." The medallion he wore around his neck began to vibrate slightly. Then the potion contained

magic as well. With effort, he dilated his pupils. Lifting his head, he could now see clearly. A woman of feeble constitution, she wore men's clothing. The pallor of her thin face was luminous in the darkness.

"Where are we?"

"In the tar-makers' clearing."

The smell of resin floated effectively through the air. Geralt heard voices coming from the side of the hearth. Someone threw on some dead wood. The flame rose, sizzling. He looked at her again, making use of the light. Her hair was held back by a band of snakeskin. Her hair...

He felt a suffocating pain in his throat and his chest, and forcefully clenched his fists.

Her hair was red like fire. Illuminated by the light of the hearth, it looked vermillion, like cinnabar.

"Are you in pain?" She read his emotions incompletely. "Wait..." He felt the shock of heat from the contact of her hand: the fire flowed down her back, and lower, toward her buttocks.

"You're coming around," she said. "Don't try to move on your own. You're very weak. Hey! Could someone help me?"

Geralt heard steps next to the hearth; he saw shadows, silhouettes. Someone bent down. It was Yurga.

"How are you feeling, lord? Better?"

"Help me turn him over," the woman said. "Carefully, slowly... Ah yes... Good. Thank you."

Lying on his stomach, he could no longer meet her gaze. He calmed and controlled the trembling of his hands. She could sense his feelings. Geralt heard the clinking of bottles in her bag and the tinkling of flasks and porcelain jars. He also heard her breathing and felt her warmth against his side. She knelt next to him.

"My injury," he asked to break the unbearable silence, "was difficult?"

"Yes, indeed. A little." A chill entered her voice. "It's often the case with bites. The worst type of injury. But you must be used to them, witcher."

She knows, she searches through my thoughts. Reads them ? Probably not. And I know why... She's afraid.

"Yes, nothing new for you," she repeated, knocking together her glass tools. "I saw that you had some scars... But I managed. I am, you see, a sorceress... and a healer. That's my specialty."

Yes, I was right, he thought. He did not respond.

"Going back to your injury," she continued calmly, "you must know that your pulse, four times slower than that of an ordinary man, saved your life. Otherwise, you would not have survived. I can say that without hesitation. I saw the bandage that you had on your leg. There was something resembling a dressing, but it was a poor imitation." Geralt remained silent.

"Later," she continued, lifting his shirt up to his neck, "the wound became infected, which is normal with bites. The infection was finally controlled. Of course, your witcher elixirs were a great help. Still, I don't understand why you still take hallucinogens. I heard your ravings, Geralt of Rivia."

She reads, he thought, she really reads thoughts. Unless Yurga told her my name. Perhaps I said it during my dreams under the effects of "black gull." Devil only knows... The knowledge of my name could mean nothing. Nothing. She doesn't know who I am. She is completely unaware of who I am.

He felt her apply to his back a cool and soothing ointment that gave off a strong smell of camphor. Her hands were small and very soft.

"Forgive my conventional methods," she said. "I could reduce your bedsore with the help of magic, but I'm tired from tending to your injury: I'm not feeling very well. I bandaged your leg and healed it as much as necessary. You're no longer in danger. Don't get up for two days. Even veins repaired by magic can rupture and cause terrible bleeding. The scar will remain, of course. A new one for your collection."

"Thank you..." He pressed his cheek against the furs to distort his voice and mask his natural tone: "Might I know to whom I owe my thanks?"

She will not tell me, he thought, or will prefer to lie.

"My name is Visenna."

/ know, he thought.

"I am glad," he said slowly, keeping his cheek to the furs all the while, "I am pleased that our paths have crossed, Visenna."

"By chance," she replied coolly, replacing his shirt on his back and covering it with fur blankets. "The customs official informed me that someone had need of my art. When my presence is necessary, I go. It's a strange habit of mine. Listen: I gave the ointment to the merchant. Ask him to apply it morning and evening. Since he says that you saved his life, he can perform that service for you."

"And me, Visenna? How can I thank you?"

"Don't talk about that. I never take money from witchers. Call it solidarity, if you like, professional solidarity. And sympathy. In the cause of that sympathy I will tell you, listen to one more piece of advice, or if you prefer, the prescription of a healer: stop taking hallucinogens, Geralt. Hallucinogens aren't curative; they don't heal anything."

"Thank you, Visenna, for your help and your advice. I am grateful to you... for everything."

He moved his hand from under the furs and touched the healer's knee. It began to tremble. She took his hand and squeezed it slightly. Geralt carefully freed his fingers to grasp her forearm.

Of course it was the smooth skin of a young girl. The sorceress trembled even more, but did not withdraw her arm. He found the hand of the young woman and squeezed it firmly.

His medallion, hanging around his neck, vibrated in agitation.

"Thank you, Visenna," he repeated, controlling the tremor in his voice. "I'm glad that our paths have crossed."

"It was chance..." she answered again, but this time without coldness in her voice.

"Perhaps it was destiny?" he suggested, surprised that her excitement and nervousness had disappeared without leaving a trace. "Do you believe in destiny, Visenna?"

"Yes," she said, after some time. "I believe in it."

"Do you believe that people bound by fate," he continued, "necessarily meet one another?"

"I believe that too... What are you doing? Don't turn over."

"I want to see your face... Visenna. I want to see your eyes. And you... you can look into mine."

She made a movement as if she would fall to her knees, but she remained at his side. Geralt turned slowly, wincing in pain. The light was bright: someone had thrown more wood on the fire.

The sorceress did not move. She turned her face in profile. The witcher noticed then that her lips trembled. She squeezed his hand hard.

Geralt watched her carefully.

There was no resemblance. Her profile was completely different. A small nose. A narrow chin. The woman said nothing. She finally leaned over and met his eyes. Closely. All without a word.

"Do my improved eyes please you?" he asked calmly. "They're not very common... Do you know, Visenna, what is done to the eyes of witchers to improve them? Do you know that this is not always successful?"

"Stop," she said softly. "Stop it, Geralt."

"Geralt..." He felt suddenly that something had broken in him. "It's Vesemir who called me that. Geralt of Rivia! I even learned to imitate the regional accent. Probably to fill an inner need to belong somewhere. Even if the sentiment is fictitious. Vesemir... gave me that name. He also revealed your identity to me. Not without reluctance."

"Shut up, Geralt, shut up."

"You tell me today that you believe in destiny. At the time, did you believe in it already? Yes, certainly. You already saw that destiny would ordain our meeting. Even so, it should be noted that you yourself contributed little toward its realization."

The woman still said nothing.

"I always wanted... I asked myself what I would say when we met. I thought about the question I would ask you. I imagined being able to feel a perverse pleasure..."

A tear beaded distinctly on the healer's cheek. Geralt felt his throat tighten painfully. He was tired, sleepy, weak.

"In the light of day..." he murmured, "tomorrow, in the light of the sun, I will look into your eyes, Visenna... And I will ask my question. Or perhaps I won't ask, because it's too late. Was it destiny? Yes, Yen was right. It is not enough to be, yourself, subject to destiny. There must be something more... But I will look into your eyes tomorrow... In the light of the sun."

"No," she replied softly, in a voice of velvet that pierced through and summoned up the layers of memory that were missing, nonexistent, but remained nevertheless.

"If," he protested. "If I want to..."

"No. Sleep now. When you wake up, you will stop wanting that. What good is it to look eyes by the light of the sun? What will that change? We can't turn back time. We can't change anything. What sense is there in asking me that question, Geralt? The fact that I don't know of any response that will really give you a perverse pleasure? That will give us that mutual destruction? No, we will not look into each other's eyes. Hypnotize yourself, Geralt. Between us, know that it wasn't Vesemir who gave you that name. Even if this does not change anything and does not undo the past, I want you to know that. Farewell, take care of yourself. Don't try to find me..."

"Visenna..."

"No, Geralt. You're going to fall asleep. And me... I will have been a dream. Goodbye."

"No, Visenna!"

"Sleep!" she intoned in a velvet voice that broke the witcher's will and tore it like

tissue.

"Sleep."

Geralt fell asleep.

VI

"Are we already in the territory of Outer Rivia, Yurga?"

"Since yesterday, my lord Geralt. We will reach the Yarouga river soon. On the other side, we will be in my home. Look, even the horses are walking more quickly and leaning their heads forward. They've picked up the smell of the barn and the house."

"The house... You live within the castle's fortifications?"

"No, in the suburb."

"Interesting." The witcher looked around. "There's practically no evidence of the war. It was said, however, that the country was horribly destroyed."

"Well," Yurga replied, "there is a shortage of everything but ruins... at least, that's not what's missing. Look carefully: almost every house, every courtyard, has a brand new frame. Beyond the river, you see, there it's even worse, where the fire burned everything to the ground... War is war, but one must keep on living. We suffered the worst torments when the Black Ones crossed through our lands. It seemed that they wanted to turn everything

into a desert. Many of those who fled then have never returned. In their place, newcomers have settled. Life must go on."

"That's right," murmured Geralt, "life must go on. Regardless of the past... one must keep on living..."

"Absolutely right. Here! Look at it this way. I sewed and patched your trousers. Now they are like new. Just like this land, my lord Geralt. The war tore and trampled it under iron horseshoes; bruised and bloodied it; but the land renews itself, becoming fertile once more: the bodies themselves work to enrich the soil, even if it is difficult to work the land because of the bones and the armor cluttering the fields. Earth will overcome iron."

"You don't fear the return of the Nilfgaardians... the Black Ones? Now they know the path through the mountains..."

"Well of course, we live in fear. But what can we do? Sit down and cry? Tremble? One must keep on living. Come what may. Whatever fate has in store for us, we can't avoid it."

"You believe, then, in destiny?"

"How could I not believe in it? After our meeting on the enchanted bridge where you saved my life! Oh, master witcher, you'll see that my Chrysididae will be kissing your feet..."

"Stop with that. In truth, I am the one indebted to you. On the bridge... I was only doing my job, Yurga. I was practicing my profession, which consists of protecting humans for money, not for charity. Yurga, you know what people say about witchers? That no-one knows which is worse... them, or the monsters that they destroy."

"That's all wrong, lord, I don't understand why you talk like that. You think that I don't have my own eyes to see with? You are cut from the same cloth as that healer..."

"Visenna..."

"She didn't tell me her name. She came to us and offered her services without hesitation, knowing that we needed her. That evening, by the time I got down from my horse, she was already taking care of you. Oh, my lord, she took such good care of your leg. The air was filled with magic and we all fled, terrified, into the forest. And then the blood ran from her nose. Magic, apparently, is not easy. She bandaged you with such delicacy, like..."

"Like a mother?" Geralt asked through clenched teeth.

"Effectively. That's right. And when you were asleep..."

"Yes, Yurga?"

"White as a sheet, she was barely on her feet. But she came to ask us if any of the rest of us needed her help. The tar-maker, who had his hand crushed by a tree, benefited from her care. And she didn't take a cent. She even left the medicine. I know, Geralt, that there are many things said in the world about witchers and sorceresses, but not here. We, the people of Upper Sodden, of Outer Rivia, we know the truth. We need sorceresses too much not to know who they really are. Their memories are not peddled by storytellers or gossips, but etched in stone. You saw for yourself back in the woods. Besides, my lord, you certainly know better than I do. The whole world knows about the battle that was fought here less than a year ago. You must have heard about it."

"I haven't been back here for over a year. I was in the North. But I heard talk... The second battle of Sodden..."

"Exactly. You will see the hill and the rock. Before, the hill had the ordinary name of 'Mount Coulemelle,' but now all the world knows it as the Sorcerers' mountain or the mountain of the fourteen. Because twenty-two sorcerers joined the battle and fourteen died. It was a terrible struggle, master Geralt. The ground rose up, the sky spat fiery rain. Lightning struck. Corpses littered the ground. But the sorcerers at last vanquished the Black Ones and snuffed out the power that animated them. Fourteen of them did not return. Fourteen of them gave their lives... What's wrong, my lord? What is it?"

"Nothing. Continue, Yurga."

"The battle was terrible, oh! Without the sorcerers on the hill, we surely would not be able to talk like this today, you and I, on the tranquil road to my house, because it wouldn't exist anymore, and neither would I, and perhaps you wouldn't either... Yes, we are indebted to all those sorcerers. Fourteen of them died in our defense, we the people of Sodden and Outer Rivia. Of course there were others who fought as well: warriors, nobles and peasants alike, anyone who could lay hands on a pitchfork or an ax, or even a stake... All acted with courage. Many of them died. But the sorcerers... Nothing is more natural for a warrior than to die on the field of battle, and then, that life is short anyway... But sorcerers can live as long as they like. Even so, they did not hesitate."

"They did not hesitate," repeated the witcher, wiping his forehead. "They did not hesitate. And me, I was in the North..."

"What's wrong, my lord?"

"Nothing."

"Yes... All of us, in the area, we leave flowers on that hill and through May, Belleteyn, the fire always burns. It will burn forever and ever. These fourteen sorcerers will live eternally in the memories of men. Living in memory, master Geralt, it's... it's something more!"

"You're right, Yurga."

"Every child knows the names of the fourteen carved in stone at the top of the hill. You don't believe me? Listen: Axel known as Raby, Triss Merigold, Atlan Kerk, Vanielle of Bruga, Dagobert of Vole..."

"Stop, Yurga."

"What's wrong, my lord? You're as pale as death."

"Nothing."

He climbed the hill very slowly, carefully, attentive to the work of tendons and muscles after their magical healing. Despite being completely healed, the wound still required his attention, and he took care not to put his full weight on the leg. It was hot. The smell of the grass intoxicated him and clouded his mind, but it was pleasant.

The obelisk had not been installed in the center of the plateau at the top of the hill, but further down, behind a row of sharp stones. If Geralt had come before sunset, the shadow cast on the standing stone by the row of stones would accurately represent the perimeter and indicate the direction in which each sorcerer's face was turned during the battle. He looked in each direction, over the endless rolling fields. If there were any bones left - he was certain - they were covered by the abundant grass. A hawk circled in the distance, hovering serenely, with wings outstretched: the only movement in a landscape petrified by the heat wave.

The base of the obelisk was large. To encircle it would require at least four or five people with arms outstretched. It was obvious that it would have been impossible to transport it so far without resorting to magic. The face of the standing stone that faced the row of stones had been meticulously polished.

On it had been engraved in runic characters the names of the fourteen deceased.

He approached it slowly. Yurga, indeed, was right. At the foot of the obelisk, common flowers, wildflowers, poppies, lupines, forget-me-nots, had been placed.

Triss Merigold, chestnut hair, cheerful, ready to burst into laughter for no reason at all, like a child. He liked her. It had been mutual.

Lawdvor of Murivel, with whom Geralt had avoided a fight in the city of Vizima, on a day when he had caught the witcher in the act of manipulating dice with a discreet telekinesis.

Lytta Neyd, alias Coral. She had been dubbed with nickname because of the color of the cream she applied to her lips. She had once spoken ill of Geralt

to the King Belohun, who then imprisoned him for a week in a dungeon. As soon as he was released, he went to find her to ask for her reasons and had found himself in bed with the beautiful woman, without knowing how, for another week.

Gorazd the Elder who had wanted to pay him 100 marks in exchange for the opportunity to examine his eyes and even 1,000 for the chance to dissect him, "not necessarily today," he had clarified.

He waited three more years.

Geralt heard from behind him a quiet rustle. He turned.

She was barefoot, dressed in a simple linen dress. Long fair hair tumbled free over her shoulders. A daisy-chain crown adorned her brow.

"Greetings to you," he said.

Without answering, she looked at him with eyes that were blue and cold.

Geralt noticed that she was not tanned. It was strange, because the skin of the country girls, scorched by the sun, was ordinarily dark by the end of the summer. Her face and what was visible of her shoulders was missing the golden tint.

"You've brought flowers?"

She smiled and lowered her eyelids. He felt a chill set in. She passed by him without a word and knelt at the foot of the monument, touching the stone with her hand.

"I don't bring flowers," she said, lifting her head. "Those that have been brought here are for me."

He watched her carefully. She knelt, her body hiding the last name engraved on the stone. The girl emitted a glow of light against the base of the dark rock.

"Who are you?" he asked slowly.

"You do not know?"

/ know, he thought, looking at the icy blue of her eyes. Yes, I think that I know.

Geralt felt calm. He could not be otherwise. Not now.

"I have always been curious to see you, madam."

"You don't have to give me such a title," she replied coldly. "We have known each other for years, haven't we?"

"We know each other," he agreed. "They say that you follow in my steps."

"I go my own way. But you, you had never, until just now, looked behind you. You turned back today for the first time."

Geralt remained silent. Tired, he had nothing to say.

"How... How will it happen?" he asked her at last, coldly and without emotion.

"I will take you by the hand," she replied, looking him straight in the eye. "I will take you by the hand and lead you across the meadow, through a cold and wet fog."

"And after? What is there beyond the fog?"

"Nothing," she replied, smiling. "After that, there is nothing."

"You have followed me step by step," he said, "cutting down the ones in my path. Why? So that I would be alone, isn't that right? And finally begin to know fear? I'll tell you the truth. You have always frightened me. I didn't turn back for fear of seeing you behind me. I was always afraid. I have lived my life in fear, until today..."

"Until today?"

"Yes. We stand face to face, but I don't feel any anxiety. In taking everything from me, you have also stripped me of fear."

"Why are your eyes, then, filled with terror, Geralt of Rivia? Your hands shake. You are pale. Why? Are you afraid to read the fourteenth name engraved on the obelisk? If you like, I can tell you the name."

"No, you don't need to. I know whose name it is. The circle closes. The snake bites his own tail. So be it. You and your name. The flowers. For you and for me. The fourteenth name engraved at the base, the name that I gave my heart to by night and by the light of the sun, in frost, drought, and rain. No, I will not speak it now."

"But yes, speak it."

"Yennefer... Yennefer de Vengerberg."

"But the flowers are for me."

"End this," he managed to say. "Take... take my hand."

She stood and approached him. Geralt felt a chill, hard and penetrating.

"Not today," she replied. "Another day, yes. But not today."

"You've taken everything from me..."

"No," she interrupted. "Me, I take nothing. I only take by the hand. So that no-one must be alone and lost in the fog... Goodbye, Geralt of Rivia. Some other day."

The witcher did not respond. She turned slowly and then disappeared into the fog that was drowning the summit of the hill where everything was disappearing: into that damp and white haze vanished the obelisk, the flowers placed at its base and the fourteen engraved names. Soon there was nothing left but the fog and the grass wet with brilliant droplets under his feet, a grass whose sweet, heavy aroma created a doleful atmosphere, a will to forget and collapse from fatigue...

"Master Geralt! What is it? Were you asleep? I warned you that you could still weaken yourself. Why did you climb to the summit?"

"I was asleep," he groaned, wiping his face with his hand. "I was asleep, by the plague... It's nothing, Yurga, it's because of this heat..."

"Yes, you have a devil of a fever... We must continue on our way, my lord. Come, I'll help you down the slope."

"I have nothing..."

"Nothing, nothing. I'm curious to know the reason for your staggering. By the plague, why did you climb the hill in this heat? You wanted to read all their names?"

"Nothing... Yurga... you really remember all of the names inscribed on the monument?"

"Of course."

"I'll test your memory... The last. The fourteenth. What is it?"

"But you're a real skeptic. Don't you believe anything? You want to verify that I'm not lying? I told you that even children know the names. The last, you say? Yes, the last, it's Yol Grethen of Carreras. You know her, perhaps?"

"No," he replied. "I don't know her."

VII

"Master Geralt?"

"Yes, Yurga?"

The merchant bowed his head and was quiet, wrapping his finger with the thin strap with which he had repaired the witcher's seat. He stood at last and nudged the back of the valet who was driving the cart.

"Let go of the reins, Profit. I'll drive. Sit on the seat next to me, master Geralt. And you, Profit, what are you still doing here? Come on, hop to it! We need to talk. No need for your ears here!"

Roach, ahead of them a little and biting the rope that secured her to the charriot, appeared to envy the little mare that Profit rode at a trot along the highway.

Yurga clicked his tongue, lightly striking the horse with the reins. "Well," he drawled, "the situation is this, my lord. I promised you... then, on the bridge... I made a promise..."

"Forget it," the witcher interrupted promptly. "Forget it, Yurga."

"I cannot forget it," the merchant responded bluntly, "my word is not the wind. That which I don't expect to find at home when I return with you."

"Leave me be. I don't want anything from you. We are settled."

"No, lord. If I find such a thing at home, it will be the sign of destiny. And if one makes a mockery of Destiny, if one tells lies, she takes it very seriously."

/ know, thought the witcher. / know.

"But... master Geralt..."

"What, Yurga?"

"I won't find anything at home that I don't expect to see. Not a thing, let alone what you want. Listen, master witcher: Chrysididae, my wife, will give me no more children. Whatever may happen, there will not be a new child at home. You are mistaken."

Geralt did not respond.

Yurga remained quiet also. Roach snorted again, tossing her head.

"But I have two sons," Yurga said very quickly, looking at the road ahead of him. "Two healthy sons, strong and not stupid. I must send them into apprenticeships. One of them will, I think, learn the trade with me. But the other..."

Geralt continued to be silent. Yurga turned his head and looked at him:

"You were saying? You demanded an oath from me on the bridge. It was for you to find a child, nothing else, isn't that so? I have two sons: let one of them study the witchers' arts. It's not a bad idea."

"You are sure," Geralt interrupted in a low voice, "that he isn't stupid?"

Yurga blinked.

"Defending people, saving their lives, in your opinion, is it a good or a bad thing? Those fourteen, on the hill? You, on the bridge? What you yourself have accomplished, is it good or bad?"

"I don't know," Geralt managed to respond. "I don't know, Yurga. Sometimes, I think that I know. But sometimes I have my doubts as well. Would you like for your son to have such doubts?"

"And why not?" the merchant replied seriously. "Why not have doubts? It's nothing but a human and good thing."

"What?"

"Doubt. Only an evil man, master Geralt, is without it. And no-one escapes his destiny."

The witcher did not respond.

The main road ran along a high promontory and bent birches that mysteriously managed to keep hold of the steep slope. The trees had yellow leaves. Fall is returning, thought Geralt, it's a new autumn. Below, a river shimmered. Behind a freshly-whitewashed fence, one could see the roofs of houses and the polished stilts of the wharf.

The winch squeaked.

The ferry was heading toward the edge, pushing a wave ahead of it. It split the waters with its blunt prow, pushing aside the grass and leaves that floated on the surface, trapped by a coating of dust. The ropes, pulled by the ferrymen, groaned. The crowd assembled on the banks was raising a commotion: women's cries, men's cursing, children's tears, bellowing, neighing, bleating. The deep monotone chant of fear.

"Stand back! Make way! Stand back, damn it!" shouted a knight, his head covered by a bloody rag.

His horse, immersed up to the abdomen, was annoyed, lifting its forelegs roughly and raising splashes. On the pier could be heard screams, cries: soldiers armed with shield pushed the crowd back, striking where they could with the butt of their spears.

"Stay away from the ferry!" cried the knight, swinging his sword. "The army has priority! Stay back, or heads will fly!"

Geralt pulled on the reins to stop his horse, which danced on the edge of the slope.

At the bottom of the valley marched heavily-armed soldiers. The movement of their weapons and armor enveloped the wearers in a cloud of dust that reached the shield-bearers in their path.

"Geraaaalt!"

The witcher looked down. A thin man with a cherry-colored jacket and a hat with an egret-feather plume jumped up and hailed him from a cart loaded with wooden cages that had been abandoned at the side of the road. In the cages, hens and geese were cackling constantly.

"Geraaaalt, it's me!"

"Dandelion! Come join me!"

"Stay away from the ferry," the knight continued to scream from his bandaged head, on the pier. "The ferry is only for the army! If you want to get to the other side, you pack of dogs, take your hatchets and get to work in the forest! Make yourself a raft! The ferry is only for the army!"

"By all the gods, Geralt," panted the poet, climbing the side of the valley. His cherry-colored jacket was covered with poultry feathers white as snow. "You see what's happening? Sudden just lost the battle: they retreated. Retreat? But what am I saying? It's more of a stampede... a full panic! We need to get out of here, Geralt, and cross to the other side of the Yarouga river..."

"What are you doing here, Dandelion? Where did you come from?"

"What am I doing here?" shouted the bard. "You ask me that? I am doing the same as the others. I was jolted all day yesterday on this cart! Some son of a bitch stole my horses during the night! Geralt, I beg you, get me out of here! Those Nilfgaardians could arrive at any moment! Anyone without the Yarouga river between himself and their army will be slaughtered. Slaughtered, you understand?"

"Don't panic, Dandelion."

Below, they heard the neighing of horses forced aboard the ferry and the clamor of their hooves striking the boards; the screaming; the uproar of the crowd; the sound of splashing caused by a cart pushed into the water; the bellowing of cattle whose faces broke the surface of the water. Geralt saw the crates and bundles of hay carried by the current smash against the hull of the ferry and continue on their way. All was clamor and cursing; a cloud of dust rose from the valley; hoofbeats could be heard.

"Each in turn!" yelled the knight with the bandaged head, plunging with his horse into the crowd. "In order, you sons of bitches! One after the other!"

"Geralt," moaned Dandelion, clinging to the stirrup, "you know what's happening? We'll never get aboard the ferry. The soldiers will outdo themselves and burn it afterward so it can't be used by Nilfgaardians. That's what they do in general, eh?"

"You're right," agreed the witcher. "That's the favored practice. I still don't understand why all these people are in such a panic! Is this the first war they've ever seen? Usually, the royal troops fight amongst themselves, then the kings come to an agreement, sign a treaty and take advantage of the occasion to kill each other. These events shouldn't concern all the people stampeding on the pier! What explains this outburst of violence?"

Dandelion looked directly at the witcher's face without releasing the stirrup:

"You clearly have very meager access to information, Geralt. Or you don't know how to interpret it. This is not an ordinary war of succession or a dispute over the ownership of a piece of land; we are not dealing with the quarrel of two noblemen to which peasants, occupied by their crops, remain passive witnesses."

"What is it then? Enlighten me, because I don't know what's going on. Between you and me, it doesn't interest me much, but explain it anyway, please."

"This war is unique," the bard explained seriously. "The armies of Nilfgaard leave behind them nothing but desolation and corpses: entire fields of corpses. It's a war of total extermination. Nilfgaard against everything. The cruelty..."

"There is no war without cruelty," the witcher interrupted. "You're exaggerating, Dandelion. It's like burning the ferry: such is the practice... It is, I would say, a military tradition. Since the beginning of the world, armies have been killing, stealing, burning and attacking, unceasingly, and in that order. Since the beginning of the world, when a war breaks out, the farmers and their wives hide in the woods with the few possessions that they can carry and return home when the conflict is over..."

"Not this war, Geralt. After this war, no-one returns. There will be nothing to return to. Nilfgaard leaves behind it only rubble; its armies advance like lava from which no-one escapes. The roads are strewn, for miles, with gallows and pyres; the sky is cut with columns of smoke as long as the horizon. Since the beginning of the world, in fact, nothing of this sort has happened before. Since the world is our world... You must understand that

the Nilfgaardians have descended from their mountains to destroy this world."

"That's absurd. Who would benefit from destroying the world? Wars aren't fought for the sake of destruction. Wars are fought for two reasons: the first is power; the second is money."

"Stop your philosophizing, Geralt! You can't change what's happening with philosophy! Why aren't you hearing me? Why do you refuse to understand? Believe me, Yarouga will not stop Nilfgaard's momentum. In winter, when the river freezes, they will push the front even farther. I tell you this: we must flee to the North. They may not reach that far. But in any case, our world will no longer be the same. Geralt, don't leave me alone here! Don't go without me! Don't leave me!"

"You've lost your mind, Dandelion." The witcher leaned over his saddle. "Fear must have made you take leave of your senses. How can you believe that I would leave you alone? Give me your hand. Get on my horse. You won't find anything of value on the ferry. Besides, they'll never let you on board. I'll take you up the river. We'll look for a boat or a raft."

"The Nilfgaardians will catch us. They are already there. Have you noticed the knights? You can see that they come directly from the battlefield. Let's go downriver, toward the mouth of the Ina.

"Stop panicking. We'll get through, don't worry. Downriver, there are crowds of fugitives. At each ford, like here, there will be problems with crossing by ferry. All the boats

must have been requisitioned. We'll go upriver, against the current. Don't be afraid. I'll get you across, on a tree trunk if necessary."

"You can hardly see the other bank!"

"Stop complaining. I told you I would get you across."

"And you?"

"Get on my horse. We'll discuss it on the way. Hey, by the devil, you're not taking this huge bag! You want to break Roach's spine?"

"It's Roach? Roach was a bay, this one is chestnut."

"All of my horses are named Roach. You know that very well. Stop giving me the run-around. What do you have in there? Gold?"

"Manuscripts! Poems! And my rations..."

"Throw it all in the river. You'll write new poems. As for food, I'll share mine with you."

Dandelion made a mournful face, but didn't hesitate. He threw his bag into the water and jumped onto the horse, sitting on the saddlebags and clinging to the witcher's belt.

"On the way, on the way," he repeated anxiously. "Don't lose any time, Geralt, go into the woods before..."

"Stop, Dandelion... You're making Roach nervous."

"Don't mock me. If you knew what I..."

"Shut up, by the plague. We're taking the road. I'd like to get you across before nightfall."

"Me? And you?"

"There's nothing calling me to the other side of the river."

"Have you gone mad, Geralt? You've had enough of living? What are you doing?"

"It's nothing that concerns you. I'm going to Cintra."

"To Cintra? But Cintra doesn't exist anymore!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Cintra doesn't exist anymore. It's only rubble and ruins. The Nilfgaardians..."

"Get down, Dandelion..."

"What?"

"Get down!"

The witcher turned forcefully. At the sight of his face, the troubadour shot down from the horse like an arrow, stumbling. Geralt in turn dismounted calmly. Having passed the reins over the mare's head, the witcher stood indecisively for a moment before running his gloved hand over his face. He sat on a stump opposite a bush of blood-red dogwood shoots.

"Come here, Dandelion," he said. "Sit with me and tell me what happened to Cintra. Tell me everything."

The poet sat:

"The Nilfgaardians dealt the first blow," he began after a moment of silence. "There were thousands. They met with the armies of Cintra in the Marnadal valley. The battle lasted all day: from dawn to dusk. Cintra's troops valiantly resisted before being decimated. The king died, and that's when the queen..."

"Calanthe."

"Yes. Seeing that her army had succumbed to panic and scattered, she gathered around herself and her standard any who could still fight and formed a line of defense that reached the river, next to the city. All the soldiers who were still able followed."

"And Calanthe?"

"With a handful of knights, she covered the troops' crossing and defended the rear. They say she fought like a man, plunging into the thick of the battle. She was impaled by pikes when she charged against the Nilfgaardian infantry. She was then evacuated to the city."

What's in that flask, Geralt?"

"Vodka. Want some?"

"Well then, gladly."

"Speak. Continue, Dandelion. Tell me everything."

"The city wasn't properly defended. There was no headquarters. The defensive walls were empty. The rest of the knights and their families, the princes and the queen, barricaded themselves in the castle. The Nilfgaardians then took the castle after their sorcerers reduced the gate to cinders and burned down the walls. Only the tower, apparently protected by magic, resisted the spells of the Nilfgaardian sorcerers. Even so, the attackers penetrated inside four days later without making camp. The women had killed the children, the boys and girls, and fell upon their own swords or... What's is it, Geralt?"

"Continue, Dandelion."

"Or... like Calanthe... head first, from the battlement, the very top... It's said that she

asked to be... but no-one would agree. So she climbed up to the crenelations and... jumped

head first. They say they did horrible things to the corpse afterward. I don't want... What is it? ,,

"Nothing, Dandelion... At Cintra, there was... a child: the little daughter of Calanthe, about ten or eleven years old. Her name was Ciri. Have you heard of her?"

"No, but a there was terrible massacre that left almost no-one alive in the city and the castle. None of the defenders of the keep escaped from death, as I told you. Most of the women and the children of the royal families were there."

The witcher remained silent.

"You knew Calanthe?" asked Dandelion.

"I knew her, indeed."

"And the little girl you told me of? Ciri?"

"I knew her well."

A wind blew across the river, rippling the surface of the water and shaking the branches of the bush. Some leaves flew by, swirling. It's fall, the witcher thought. It's the new autumn.

Geralt stood.

"Do you believe in destiny, Dandelion?"

The bard lifted his head and looked at the witcher with eyes wide with astonishment.

"Why do you ask me that?"

"Answer."

"Well... yes, I believe."

"But do you know that destiny alone is not enough? That there must be something more?"

"I don't understand."

"You're not alone. But that's how it is. It takes something more. The problem is that I... I never knew what that was."

"What is it, Geralt?"

"Nothing, Dandelion. Come on, in the saddle. Let's go. Hurry up. Who knows how long it will take to find a big enough boat. I'm still not abandoning Roach."

"We're going to cross together, then?" asked the poet, invigorated.

"Yes. I have nothing more to look for on this side of the river."

IX

"Yurga!"

"Chrysididae!"

The young woman standing next to the gate ran, stumbling and crying out, hair flying, to Yurga who tossed the rains to his servant and leapt out of the cart toward his wife. He took her by the waist, energized, lifted her and whirled.

"I'm back, Chrysididae! I'm back!"

"Yurga!"

"I'm back! Throw the doors open wide! The master of the house has returned!"

Surprised in the middle of doing laundry, Chrysididae was wet and smelled of soapy water. Yurga set her back down without releasing her. She remained in his arms, trembling, pressed tight against him.

"Come with me to the house, Chrysididae."

"By the gods, you returned... I couldn't sleep... Yurga... I couldn't even sleep..."

"I'm back. Hey, I'm back! I've even come back rich, Chrysididae! You see the cart? Hey, Profit! Crack the whip, go through the gate! You see the cart, Chrysididae? It carries a lot of things..."

"Yurga, what do I care about your cart? You've come back... in good health... whole..."

"I came back rich, I tell you. Come see..."

"Yurga? And him, who is he? The one dressed in black? By the gods, with a sword..."

The merchant turned. Dismounting, the witcher pretended, with his back turned, to settle the cinches and adjust the saddle of his horse. He did not look up and he did not approach.

"I'll tell you later. Oh, Chrysididae, as long as... Tell me, where are the children? They're in good health?"

"They're in good health, Yurga, in good health. They went out to the fields to shoot crows. The neighbors will tell them to come home. They'll turn up right away, all three..."

"All three? What's... Chrysididae? You can..."

"No... but I must tell you something... you won't get angry?"

"Me? With you?"

"I adopted a little girl, Yurga. The druids took her in... You know, the ones who saved the lives of children after the war... They gathered them up in the forests, the lost and abandoned kids... barely alive... Yurga? Are you angry?"

Yurga slapped his hand to his forehead and turned around. The witcher walked behind the cart, leading his horse. Avoiding their gaze, he kept turning his head.

"Yurga?"

"Oh, by the gods," groaned the merchant. "By the gods, Chrysididae! Something that I didn't expect! At home!"

"Don't be angry, Yurga... You'll see that you'll grow to love her. She's a smart little girl, friendly, hardworking... a little strange, it's true. She refused to say where she was from and then started to cry. So I don't ask her questions. Yurga, you know how much I've always wanted to have a little girl... What do you think?"

"Nothing," he replied softly. "Nothing. It's destiny." All along the way, he kept repeating the word feverishly: "Destiny, destiny... By the gods... we aren't capable of understanding what it is, Chrysididae. It's impossible to know the thoughts of something like that. And the dreams. We aren't capable..."

"Papa!!!"

"Nadbor! Sulik! How you've grown! Regular little bulls! Come to me..."

Yurga stopped dead when he saw the sickly little girl with her ashen hair walking slowly behind the boys. The little girl looked at him. The merchant noticed the large green eyes like spring grass and bright as two stars. He saw her suddenly pick up speed and run... He heard her cry out in a shrill and piercing voice:

"Geralt!"

The witcher turned instantly and rushed to meet the young girl. The scene left Yurga speechless. He had never seen anyone move so fast.

They met in the middle of the yard: the little girl with ashen hair surrounded by a gray dress; the white-haired witcher with his sword on his shoulder, dressed in black leather studded with silver; bounding lightly; the little girl trotting; the witcher kneeling; the tiny hands of the little girl around his neck; the mouse-gray hair of the girl falling on the witcher's shoulders. Chrysididae gave a muffled scream. Yurga drew her to him without saying a word and took her in his arms. His other arm hugged the two boys.

"Geralt!" the little girl repeated, hugging the witcher's chest. "You've found me! I knew it! I always knew! I knew you'd find me!"

"Ciri," the witcher said.

Yurga didn't see Geralt's face, hidden by the little girl's ashen hair. He only saw black-gloved hands squeezing Ciri's back and shoulders.

"You've finally found me! Oh, Geralt! I waited all this time! It took so long... We'll stay together now, won't we? Now we'll be together, right? Say it, Geralt! Forever! Say it!"

"Forever, Ciri."

"It's just like they predicted, Geralt! Like they predicted... I'm your destiny? Say it! I'm your destiny?"

Yurga saw astonishment in the eyes of the witcher. He heard Chrysididae's discreet sobs and felt her shoulders trembling. He knew that he would not understand the answer, but he waited anyway. With good reason:

"You're more than that, Ciri. More than that."

THE SWORD OF DESTINY
Andrzej Sapkowski



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